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Chapter 1

Scourge stared hatefully up at the ginger tom who stood over him, coughing and choking on his own blood, the metallic taste coating his throat thickly. Spasms rocked his body as the life poured out of him, his ice blue eyes alight with rage. He fought back the blackness that wanted to swallow him whole, focusing his failing vision on the green eyes that stared back at him.

He wanted to speak, to spit, to throw himself at the tom in one last fit of rage, yet the last of the energy he had was quickly fading from his paws. He desperately flexed his claws, the dog teeth on the ends snagging on the sticky grass that he lay on and all at once, his sight collapsed and did not come back.

"***Scourge***." A voice whispered, hardly there, like a soft breeze. Only it was the only sound in the deafening silence that surrounded him. He desperately clung to the sound, waiting for it to show again, wanting nothing more than to escape the emptiness that closed in around him.

Please don't leave! He begged desperately as the thick blood continued pouring from his throat, making his fur cling to his skin, the feeling no longer pleasurable now that the blood was his own.

"***The anger in your heart warms you now, but will leave you cold in your grave***." The whisper of a voice said before he was thrust into spotty blinding light, barely concealed by leaves that covered his body.

Snarling, he blinked wildly, the light blinding him as he launched himself at the lush greenery, tearing it apart effortlessly with his claws. He growled lowly in annoyance as he took in his surroundings through narrowed eyes, his long thin tail whipping around, the only thing conveying his unease.

A gentle laugh followed by soft footsteps sounded not too far away, making him jump. *Is it back?* He wondered, then his mind drifted

into more important thoughts. *Why Am I here? Why aren't I dead?* He wondered, not letting himself lag enough to know. He whipped around furiously to face the threat, his muscles tensing and unsheathing his claws, only to find that the dog teeth that had once reinforced them were missing, including his collar. He felt a small twinge of fear. Isn't that what made him? Before the dog teeth it had just been him, a defenseless kitten.

I'm still The Scourge Of The Streets, he reminded himself firmly, shaking out his fur, the fear along with it. *I'm still Scourge.*

"Who goes there?" He snapped at the moving grass in the corner of his eye.

A wide eyed young she-cat stepped through. "Excuse you?" She demanded. "You're on *my* territory!"

Scourge flattened his ears. "Your territory?" He echoed, hiding his confusion.

"Yes, my territory! And I'd suggest you leave before I flay your pelt!" She snapped.

Scourge was taken aback. This cat dared to threaten *him*? *The* Scourge?

"Are you thick in the skull?" He demanded, infuriated by the audacity of this she-cat. "Do you know who I am?!"

"Should I?" She countered.

"The collar doesn't give you a hint?" He questioned frustratedly.

"What are you talking about?"

He looked down where his collar should have been only to find that the bloodstained purple collar was no longer there, but instead a deep ring like scar left in its place. He blinked at the empty place stupidly.

"Do *you* even know who you are?" She asked, this time a concerned edge to her mew.

"Of course I do!" He snapped, hating the pity in her voice. Pushing away the burning fury underneath his pelt, he spoke in an even tone. "I'm Scourge. Who might you be?" He pushed away his clouding confusion to get a good look at the she-cat in front of him. She was pretty in a simple way. Her long white fur seemed to glitter a soft gold in the dappled sunlight and her green eyes shimmered like emeralds.

"Snowfall." She answered, the attitude thick in her voice. Like she was so important he should have known her name since the moment he was born. "Now what are you doing on my territory, Scourge?"

"I woke up here." He answered roughly.

"By any chance know of the Scourge from the Great Battle?" She questioned.

"Great Battle?" He echoed. *What an odd duckling.* He mused, looking the pretty she-cat up and down.

"With Firestar?" She pressed.

Scourge looked at her. *So she does know me.* "Of course I know him. He's me."

She snorted. "Yeah, right."

"Would you believe me if I told you I took Firestar's first life?" He offered. "You can ask him yourself if it makes you feel any better."

"Firestar is dead." She deadpanned. "That Battle happened years ago."

Scourge searched her gaze, looking for answers. "It can't be..? Oh, you're just pulling my leg!" He snapped.

"You wish, Buddy! I don't know either, but you need to leave regardless. You seem harmless enough so I'll just let you go without a scratch."

"*Harmless*?" He spat, infuriated. "No. I've-I've *murdered* cats like you

before, okay?! I have blood on my paws! I've lead a Clan of killers! Don't *tell me* I'm harmless!"

"Well, Clan of Killers leader, you wouldn't dare touch me." She said, all too sure of herself. Her haughtiness made his fur hot with anger.

He scowled at her, his claws itching for blood. Instead he kept them sheathed. "You're right." He admitted, coming up with a reason on spot. "Because I need you to help me find out why I'm here."

Snowfall rolled her green eyes. "If you leave now, be back by sun high tomorrow and I'll try and help you."

Scourge watched her intently before realizing she was sincere.

"Thank you." He meowed, the words feeling weird flowing off his tongue.

"Now leave."

"I will." He growled, turning around. The only thing he needed now was a place to sleep.

Chapter 2

Scourge eventually found refuge in a flimsy cardboard box that had been tossed aside behind a twoleg's den. It reeked of rot and stale fried foods, a scent that was familiar yet daunting from his time on the streets now that he thought he'd never smell it again.

He closed his eyes tightly and willed sleep to come, feeling exposed in the three walled enclosure. That was, at least, until he heard a voice.

"You think we'll be able to find something to eat here, hmm, Toni?" One spoke up, the voice making Scourge's fur bristle with irritation. Nobody on the streets sounded that friendly. Not when they were around him, at least.

"Why wouldn't we? Humans throw scraps out here all the time." Another reasoned, this voice frail, belonging to a much older cat. By the sound of their voice alone, it was like they were teasing death.

Scourge's stomach growled at the thought of food. When was the last time he'd eaten? It must have been forever ago. He suddenly felt hallow and shaky. What if they decided to attack him? Would he be able to fight back?

He flattened his ears and unsheathed his claws. Of course he could. He was Scourge. Hungry or not, two on one was nothing he wasn't used to. Plus "Toni" sounded like they would drop dead at any given moment. This would be an easy win for sure.

He slunk out of the box, his stomach flat on the grimy stone underneath him and ears pinned back. He whipped his head around to catch a glimpse of the two cats to find they were looking back at him, a mangy looking pair. The older one, Toni, he assumed, was frail and all skin and bones with a patchy pelt and sunken in milky colored eyes. The other was a scruffy young white and gray colored tom with narrowed yellow eyes. The tom hissed in surprise and fear at the sight of Scourge.

Scourge hissed back, arching his back and spitting angrily. "What are you looking at?!"

"A grimy kitten." The tom hissed back, using his larger body to shield his companion as they cowered behind him.

"I'm no kitten. You look like you're no more than ten moons, on the other hand." The black tom spat. "Now I don't know what you think you're doing here-"

"The same as you, it seems." The tomcat sniffed, interrupting.

Scourge swallowed his words, the anger building up in his throat in the form of a low growl.

Heavy thumping paws on the other side of the door startled all three of them, both toms giving each other a split second glance before scattering. Scourge ducked for his cardboard den, and the other two darting behind two metal cans, their eyes glowing as they peered out of the shadows at the human that stumbled out of the twoleg den, carrying a large rubbery sack. It grunted as it heaved the bag into a giant stinking dumpster across from Scourge's hiding place before turning and going right back into the den.

Scourge held his breath for a few seconds before he let it go slowly, making sure that the human was truly gone before he slunk toward the dumpster, hopping up onto the green slimy edge. He unsheathed his claws for a better grip, his nose twitching with the mouth watering smells that came from the fresh bag. A heavy thump across from him made him jump, crouching instinctively, his claws digging into the plastic. He took his attention from the possibility of a meal to face what was in front of him only to find the overgrown kitten across from him. Scourge hissed in warning. *Does he not know boundaries?*

The tom growled back, obviously not getting the point, and darted forward, ripping into the bag with his teeth. The tantalizing smells were almost too much to bear. So was the lack of respect.

Snarling, Scourge launched himself at the tom, sinking his teeth into the back of his head, his unsheathed claws churning as he

grabbed for a hold on the squirmy tomcat beneath him. Snarling and spitting, the two grappling toms fell into the dumpster.

The squishy feeling of the bags and the rotting foods that had fallen out coated his fur as Scourge landed but he swallowed back the disgust. His mind was on the fight.

The other tom shook his head viciously, reeling back and hitting the edge of the filthy bin. Scourge held on tight, his teeth clamping even tighter to the point his jaw hurt, salty blood filling his mouth. The fought the urge to rip out the hunk of flesh, knowing that if he did, he would lose hold.

The young tomcat ripped away from Scourge regardless. Thinking fast, Scourge leaped at him again, rolling him over on top of the flimsy bags, ripping open a few in the motion, the smell of slightly rotted food making them both gag. Spitting, the tom rolled onto his back, pummeling Scourge's stomach with his hind legs. Gasping with red hot anger blinding him, Scourge buried his teeth into the tom's shoulder, only a whisker length away from his throat, his mind only on one thing; this cat could cost him his dinner.

And that didn't fly with him at all.

The cat underneath him squawked and twisted away from him, hissing and spitting. Scourge met him with a few heavy blows to the face and another hiss, just in case he thought of trying anything else.

The younger had obviously thought better of it and raced away, the bags crinkling underneath his heavy paws, but not before snatching a mouthful of food from the open bag. Scourge let out another snarl, chasing after the tom and out of the dumpster, stopping on the edge of the bin to watch him run before turning back to his meal, angry that he got second pick. He huffed, rooting around in the trash anyways before dragging his own meal, a leftover chicken breast, back to the box that he had been in previously, settling down to eat and clean the grime from his fur.

Coming back to life, a fight, then a meal?

The night couldn't get any better.

Chapter 3

Scourge panted as he ran, his heart pounding in his chest. Stealing a glance behind himself, he took the time to scale a chain link fence, snagging a claw in his haste. Spitting in anger, he propelled himself further, blood spurting onto the ground and painting his steps in bright red on the concrete. There was no time to sit and lick his wounds. He needed to think- fast. They were gaining on him.

With a growl, he shot forward in one last burst of energy, propelling himself off of a slanted board and twisting midair to land behind his attackers, quickly turning to snap his jaws around their tail and yanking backwards.

Screeching in agony and surprise, the grimy female twisted in his grip, swiping at him with her claws.

"What? You thought I'd run forever?" He snorted, giving one last good yank before pouncing on her, slamming her head down on the pavement with a heavy paw. She was squirming and kicking underneath him, her yellow eyes darting around looking for means of escape. "Don't worry. I won't kill you.. Yet." He comforted with a slick grin that quickly soured into a snarl as he growled in her face. "Who sent you?"

"Like I'd tell you!" She spat back, kicking around her back legs.

"So you choose death?" Scourge questioned, looking at her with interest. Fiery personality for sure, fast, too, but not quite smart. "I mean, if you insist..."

Her chest was heaving and she was glaring up at him. "Well hurry up with it, would ya? You toms are all talk, I swear!"

Scourge snorted, unsheathing his claws and digging them into the side of the she-cat's face. Without the dog teeth they were tiny and

dull, but they still got the job done. "I'm giving you one last chance," he spoke, his voice oozing with venom. "Who *are* you?"

She closed her eyes, her chest still heaving up and down, her teeth gritted. "Bunny." She spat.

Scourge snorted with laughter. "Bunny?"

"My name." She answered, opening her eyes slightly to look at him "You were in my territory."

"Well, Bunny, this is my territory now. But you're welcome to stay if-"

"In your dreams, tomcat!" She spat, twisting and kicking him hard in the stomach, throwing him off of her in one final heave.

Hitting the pavement hard, Scourge grunted. He wheezed as he tried to gain back the air in his lungs.

"I will not be anything to you and you will leave unless you want me to call my brother." Bunny threatened, her yellow eyes glowing with fury.

Coughing, Scourge looked up at her. "I've gotta admit you're strong."

"Thank you. Now *leave*." She snarled, barring her teeth threateningly.

Scourge pushed himself to his paws and started padding away slowly, still breathing shallowly as the she-cat glared at him. "I can promise this won't be the last time you see me," Scourge said, taking a shallow breath.

"I told you to leave." Bunny snapped, taking a threatening step forward. She was still bleeding from her cheek, the dark red standing out against the ashy golden brown of her fur.

"Leaving." Scourge answered promptly, taking his exit through the sidewalk.

As soon as he was out of sight of the she-cat, he flopped down onto his side to catch his breath. It wasn't the first time the wind had been knocked out of his lungs, but it was unpleasant nonetheless. He waited until his breathing had turned from being wheezy to normal. The force had reminded him of the first time he tried to take a full grown rabbit on by himself. Those bastards had too much power in their hind legs to be mortal.

Shaking the lingering fogginess from his mind, he stood up. There were more important things to worry about rather than getting his tail kicked by a she-cat with the strength of a rabbit in her hind legs. Like breakfast. And finding out where that Snowfall cat was.

Scourge padded into the forest, licking blood from his muzzle. Garden finches weren't his favorite, but it was a lot better than rummaging through trash.

He turned his eyes to the trees, wondering when she would show. Or if she would show at all. Part of him worried that she had just duped him. Feeling stupid, he sat down and examined his torn claw, licking away the dried blood.

"You know, my Clan's medicine cat can look at for you."

Scourge gingerly sat his paw down and looked at the pretty she-cat. "Why would you want that?" He asked, trying to hide his entertainment. *Why do you care?*

"Forget I even offered if that makes you feel better," She scoffed.

"No, no, I'm genuinely interested." He insisted.

"I just don't like seeing cats hurt. Seems like you were hurt pretty badly before, too." She said, avoiding looking at him.

He stared at her, unblinking. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, that big scar around your neck for starters."

He glanced down at the empty space where fur refused to grow. It looked a lot cleaner now than it did with his collar.

With a flinch, he remembered the collar digging into his skin, wearing it thin as he grew bigger and older, breaking through to raw flesh, the skin eventually growing over the collar.

He wondered how it came to look normal now.

"That's just from my collar." He said, not wanting to remember the constant agony that came with it.

"*That's* what they do?" She asked, her pretty green eyes wide with horror.

"It was part of me." She didn't know how true that was.

"You *liked* it?"

"You must think I'm crazy." He grinned, dodging the question.

"Maybe just a little."

"You'd be right about that, then."

"That's... Good?" She frowned.

"More importantly, I just want to find out why the hell I'm here and not rotting away, being eaten by maggots, so if you could help me that'd be great." He said with a snarky grin, trying to remind her why he was here in the first place.

"You sound awfully confident for a guy who apparently died and came back to life," the she-cat pointed out.

Scourge shrugged. "Who doesn't like a confident male?"

She rolled her eyes, unable to hide her lips that turned up into a grin. "Are you always this unbearable?"

"Most times." He taunted. "So until you help me out, I guess you'll just have to deal with it."

She huffed. "I suppose we'll just get on with it then?"

"Sure." He purred, lazily stretching out, his long tail curling over his head. He could see her watch him, her green eyes flickering with annoyance at his level of comfort. He smirked back at her. "Am I bothering you?"

"No." She said, avoiding his gaze.

Scourge flopped over on his side, looking up at her. "I suppose you should start with what has happened since I've died."

She cringed. "You say it so casually."

"I've done a lot worse things while being casual."

"Like what?"

Scourge gave her a look.

"Right. Murder. Fun." She muttered. "Well.. After the Great Battle... Um.. BloodClan kinda just dissipated after that. Tons of cats died and now our leader is Jaystar. My dad is deputy. And we've just kinda been existing." She summarized.

"How long has it been since this... 'Great Battle'?" Scourge asked.

"Maybe about fifty years?" She answered uncertainly.

Scourge was silent for a moment. "So you say BloodClan just disappeared?" He asked.

"Yeah, pretty much. We haven't had trouble with them since then. Probably because.." She trailed off.

"Because I died. I get it." He grumbled. *Those cowards probably didn't even think to stay together after that.* He thought sourly. "Well, its been lovely, but I have somewhere I need to be." The black and white tom meowed, pushing himself to his paws.

"Wait. Just a moment, please."

Scourge glanced at her, raising an eyebrow questioningly.

"I.. If you ever need anything else, just... Feel free to drop by, okay?" She told him, shuffling her soft white paws awkwardly, her tail and whiskers twitching with uncertainty. "Maybe with all of this stuff going on, you might need a friend or two."

He paused to ponder over it. His initial answer to anyone else would have been a cold hard "no" but something about her awkwardness was oddly endearing.

"I'll think about it." Scourge meowed.

Chapter 4

"'I'll think about it,'" Scourge mocked himself, scrunching up his nose when he finished the sentence. "Why did I say that? I don't even *want* to see her again." He muttered, disgusted at himself. "I suppose we'll see if she really was right." He muttered, padding along the aged and familiar path. He slipped behind some loose fence boards, opening his mouth to let the new smells coat his senses. *Nothing.*

Never the less, he pushed further. *They can't really be gone. Not after everything I put into them.* He refused to believe any different, forcing his way into a rickety old Twoleg nest. Long abandoned by Twolegs, but some cats had to live there still. *At least one...*

Snarling in frustration as the metal framing on the small opening dug into his fur, he pulled himself forward only to be met with an unfriendly face paired with some just as unfriendly blue eyes.

"Who are you and what are you doing in my home?" The stranger demanded.

"Your home is in BloodClan?" Scourge questioned, looking up at the tom, his gaze refusing to break away from his. Could BloodClan really be around all these years later? *Snowfall could have lied to me.* A shimmer of hope rose in his chest.

"Never heard of it. Now leave." The tom snapped.

All hope that Scourge had instantly turned into dread and hung heavy in his belly. "Never?"

"No."

He searched the tom's gaze only to realize that he was lying. He knew something and he wasn't telling him.

"Is there anyone else here with you?" He glanced over the tom's

shoulder, trying to see if there were other cats around. *Maybe he's the new leader?*

"What does it matter to you?" The tom snapped, his fur bristling. Scourge stiffened. Had he pushed the wrong button? How far away was he from a fight?

He thought fast, trying to make sense of what was happening. "I just think you would greatly benefit from having a companion or two." Scourge meowed, trying to find a good excuse.

The tom snorted. "Alright, you're leaving." He ordered, shouldering him back through the opening in which he came. Not surprisingly, the bigger tom had hardly any trouble at all. But that didn't mean that Scourge had to give up without a fight.

"Wait, just hear me out." Scourge insisted with a growl, pushing back, cementing his paws to the ground and digging his claws into the dirty wooden floor to avoid being moved.

"You have ten seconds before I rip you to shreds." The tom warned, backing off, if only a little.

"Just think about it. More cats to find food. More cats to protect you-"

"I can protect myself." The tom interjected.

"Think about it! You could finally sleep peacefully without wondering if you're gonna be attacked." Scourge reasoned. A single cat on his own had to always keep one ear open on the streets, everyone knew.

The tom tilted his head, pondering it. "What's the catch?"

"No catch. Just protection and the guarantee of food." Scourge promised. "So what do you say?"

"Fine. Come in." He growled gruffly, stepping aside to let him step through.

Scourge slowly pulled himself back through the opening, stretching

out his limbs one at a time. *Just because past BloodClan is gone doesn't mean new BloodClan can't arise.*

"So how do you think you're going to feed the both of us? There's hardly enough on the streets for one." The tom growled.

"If there is enough of us we can have one of us go in search of food while the others do more important things." Scourge told him, sniffing at a sad lump of crumpled newspaper that reeked of the tom's scent. He realized that it was what this poor cat called bed. "Like find bedding. Though I do realize I never asked you your name."

"Clay." The tom answered. "And you?"

"Scourge."

A flicker of knowledge lit up Clay's eyes. "Like the legends."

"They do say legends never die."

"They do." Clay dipped his head. The respect was instant. He didn't have to fight for it or demand it. It was there. Exhilarating.

What would he do if he knew that it was truly him, here, in the flesh?

"You said nobody else lives here with you, right?" Scourge asked, changing the topic. He wanted to know what the tom was lying about before moving forward.

"Actually, I... have a friend that visits sometimes." Clay meowed slowly.

"Oh. Perfect." Scourge meowed. "You could ask them to join."

"Join.. What exactly do we have?"

"An alliance. A... Clan, of sorts." Scourge explained, looking around. "Mind if I have a look around?"

"Knock yourself out, I suppose." Clay meowed. "This Clan... Is it like

BloodClan at all?"

Scourge hopped onto a wooden box, sniffing around, catching scent of a mouse. "It could be." He sniffed, sweeping away a crumpled ball of paper to reveal a mouse hole. "Why does it matter?"

"Because I want to know what I'm getting into."

"What do you mean by that?" Scourge asked, sniffing at the mouse hole and settling himself down to wait.

"Well, if it's anything like I've been told of BloodClan, I want to learn how to exist in a Clan like that, first. It's hard enough living alone on the streets." Clay answered carefully. But try as the tom might, he couldn't mask the glow of admiration in his eyes.

"Don't worry." Scourge smiled. "I have plenty of experience training cats."

"You've killed, then?" The tom questioned.

"You haven't?" He turned.

"No."

"I'll teach you, then. Soon we'll have all the power we could ever want." Scourge promised.

Clay's eyes glowed with interest. "That sounds like music to my ears."

Chapter 5

"Missy, would you be a dear and grab me a mouse?" Scourge asked the she-cat across from him where he lay, basking in the sunlight. Turns out the Clay tom didn't lie about his friend coming over sometimes. He just failed to mention that "sometimes" was "most times." Not that he was complaining.

"Scourge.. Um.. there's no mice left." The small tortoiseshell answered softly.

"Don't worry. I've got it." Clay answered, pushing himself to his paws from beside Scourge. Scourge rolled his eyes in annoyance. For wanting to be like him, the tom was a pushover.

Scourge let out a soft hiss that made the tom pause. "Nonsense. Let her. Missy." The she-cat visibly cringed at her name. "Go get me a mouse. And don't come back until you have one."

Missy slowly nodded, her blue eyes filled with fear. "Of course, Scourge."

"Now go. I'm getting impatient." Scourge snorted. The she-cat didn't even know what he had done and she was already terrified of him. *Good.*

Missy nodded and was gone in an instant. Clay growled lowly. "I don't know why you insist on making her do everything,"

"Why do you care? You're my fighter. She's the hunter. If she's not good at it then that's her problem." Scourge reasoned with a shrug. "The more cats we get the less both of you will have to work. She's lucky I'm so lenient with her."

Clay sighed. "I'm grateful for what you've taught me.."

"But?" Scourge asked. "I'm sensing a but."

"But I'm worried. About Missy. She's my friend and I-"

"Want to protect her?"

"Exactly."

"There's nothing to protect her from. I'm not going to hurt her. I know you get worried, but she's just doing her duty. As should you and I." He told him gently.

"More training?"

Scourge snorted, standing up. "Don't sound excited, whatever happens." He said sarcastically. "Now attack me."

Almost immediately, without any warning, the dusty red tom launched himself at Scourge, teeth bared, snapping at him furiously.

Scourge jumped back, putting distance between the two before battering at his face with his claws, tearing at his muzzle and lips, blood pouring from the wounds as the dusty tom shook blood from his face.

"Don't stop now," Scourge hissed, attacking again without giving him time to regain his surroundings.

Clay's eyes flashed and he launched at him again, snapping his jaws at the smaller tom's chest, blood spurting out, making Scourge snarl and claw at the tom's neck furiously.

Suddenly, Scourge was bowled over, a hissing Missy standing over him with a furious expression. "What do you think you're doing?!" She demanded, her claws digging into his throat.

"Hey! Missy! It's okay!" Clay insisted from the sidelines, nudging her softly.

"Okay?" She echoed furiously. "You think this is okay?!"

"Seems like you got more fire in you than I expected." Scourge huffed, trying not to move. One wrong move and she could kill him.

"Shut it." She spat. "I'm tired of being your punching bag. If I am to

let you go, you respect me, you hear?" She snarled, her eyes alight with fury. "And no more tearing into each other without warning. If I'm to get any help from you two I better have one of you in formidable shape!"

Scourge looked up at the she-cat, realizing within seconds that she was serious. His life was in the paws of a soft kittypet. He gave a snort. "Fine."

"Promise me." She snarled, her claws digging in deeper.

"Fine! I promise! Get off of me!" He snapped, wiggling his back end, trying to get his legs underneath her to push her off.

With a huff, Missy jumped off of him and walked away, her tail swishing sassily. He could practically *feel* the smugness on her maw.

Growling, he got up to his paws. "If you want any sort of help on this hunting issue, you're going to have to gain more cats." Scourge told her.

Immediately, her tail dropped and she turned to look at him. "Couldn't be that hard. You got us to join."

This time, it was his turn to smirk. There was no way she could be able to reel in her attitude or assert herself enough to convince anyone. He knew that just from the few days he'd known her.

"Alright." Scourge smiled slyly, his tail flicking. "If you get three cats to join by tonight, I'll believe you."

"Watch me." She hissed, stalking out of the brightly lit room, kicking the limp body of a mouse at him as she left.

Scourge sniffed the mouse and grabbed it, throwing a glare at her. *Nobody disrespects me like that!* Shaking out his fur, he sat down to eat, growling lowly.

"I'll talk to her once she gets back." Clay promised lowly. "I don't think she quite understands what we're part of yet."

"Depending on how well she does, she'll either find herself a new

job or she'll just have to suck it up." Scourge sniffed, tearing into the mouse. He didn't even care how it was given to him anymore. He was starving.

"You're willing to give her a new job for fighting you?" Clay questioned, raising an eyebrow as he licked away the dust and blood on his paw.

"Why not? You proved yourself the same way." Scourge pointed out.

"Well, yes, but only because you told me to."

"Why are you arguing? Isn't this what you wanted? For me to cut her some slack? Wouldn't you rather she hunt and get to be my recruiter?" Scourge questioned crudely. "You wanted her at a place where she would be safe. She's safe here. With me and you. She knows how to fend for herself so why shouldn't that be part of what she does for me?"

"I... Sorry." Clay grumbled. "I was just confused. To me it seemed as if you were rewarding her for going against you."

"Going against me?" Scourge echoed, laughing. "No. She's doing exactly what I need her to."

"You need her to attack you?"

"No. At first I was afraid she was just mousey and scared but she proved that she's willing to fight for something, if the stakes are high enough," He licked his paw, drawing it over his ear lazily. "And that's exactly what I need."

Silently, Clay nodded to show he understood.

Oh, pet. Scourge thought. *You don't even know the beginning of it.*

Chapter 6

"How long does it take to round up three cats?" Scourge grumbled under his breath. It had been what seemed like forever after Missy had stormed off to find the new recruits and he was starting to grow impatient.

"You did give her until tonight, and it rained earlier," Clay pointed out, tugging at some fabric that stuck firmly above the windows.

"Would you stop trying to take that down? It's never going to give," Scourge growled at the tom, covering his face with his paws.

With one final, furious tug, Clay, the fabric and the pole the fabric was attached to, all came tumbling down, the pole whacking Scourge in the process.

Snarling and yowling, Scourge jumped to his paws to face the dusty tom, barring his teeth.

Clay wrestled his way out of the loads of fabric, sneezing out dust and grime before turning to Scourge and sneezing again.

"I told you to leave it be!" Scourge snarled furiously.

"I got it down, didn't I?" Clay shot back, oblivious to what had happened while he was in the fabric prison.

"And hit me!"

"Well that's not my fault! You should have moved!"

"If you two are done arguing, I have some cats I want you to meet." Missy announced, hopping in through the newly open window and sitting on the table that lay underneath it, grooming her wet fur that was spiked into patches.

Scourge huffed in annoyance and turned to look at her, noting with slight satisfaction that she had gotten stuck in the rain. Suited her

right for her swollen pride after their encounter. He wondered briefly how long it would last. "Took you long enough. Where are these cats?"

"We're meeting them right now." She answered, flicking her slick tail to the window and motioning for them to follow.

Still grumbling, Scourge hopped into the table, peering out of the newly uncovered widow, only to find an empty alleyway. Turning to Missy, he growled in annoyance. "Don't waste my time, she-cat." He warned lowly.

"Don't get huffy just yet. They're waiting somewhere else." Missy shot back, nodding to the window. "After you, Sir Attitude."

Growling warningly, Scourge clambered through the window, landing on the wet cement heavily, the two cats sliding out after him. "Where to?" He hardly wanted to ask.

Prancing to the front proudly, Missy took the lead. "Right this way, and watch your step. Broken glass."

With a snort of distain, Scourge carefully picked his way around a shattered bottle that smelled like fermented fruits and the tang of blood. It looked like somebody had already cut themselves.

Turning his attention back to Missy, he followed the proud she-cat from the alley to a wide open space filled with grass and a few sparse trees, as well as mini pits of small rocks that houses funny looking tunnels and playthings that Twoleg kits played with during the warm days. It was empty now, abandoned now that it was getting dark. He could see blood tinting at the multicolored rocks where Missy stepped.

He turned his attention to the shadows instead, where little flickers of light and fur shone through in the darkening light.

Missy sat down. "Here is my leader and my companion. We have come to talk with you."

Scourge flicked his tail and Clay nodded, sinking in next to him, his claws unsheathed.

They watched as four cats slid out from the shadows, one a light gray tabby with dark stripes, another ginger, a tan one with a stubby tail, and the last a scrawny black and white tom with large ears that reminded Scourge painfully of Bone. He briefly wondered what happened to the tom after he had died. The battle was all a blur of a memory now. He wasn't sure if the body he had seen covered in young cats through the flurry of blood and fury had been him or not, and he didn't want to know. He could only imagine what they had done to him to take him down.

A soft glimmer of hope in him wished that Bone might had been the ones that had survived.

Pushing away the feeling, he watched the four cats approach them carefully, the tabby and stubby tailed one flanking the sicker tom. The ginger looked Scourge up and down. "I hear you've been promising a lot to city cats." He said vaguely.

"Food and shelter." Scourge replied curtly.

"So it's true?" The ginger tom asked, his eyes wide in surprise.

"Why would I lie?" Scourge questioned. He felt nearly excited. If he just sealed the deal here then he would more than double his numbers. But if he missed a cue or said something wrong it could all be lost. "I see the spotted one is sick. Does he need food? Shelter? Maybe water?" He suggested, eyeing the large eared tom curiously.

He wondered what made his gray eyes look so dead.

The ginger quickly stepped in front of him, breaking his eye contact. "Yes. And I understand that you can give that to us?" His golden eyes were questioning.

I wonder what it will take to break him. Scourge thought as he looked into his hopeful eyes.

"I can."

"That's great-"

"If you would join my Clan." Scourge finished.

"Pardon?" The ginger asked, the hope dying in his eyes and being quickly replaced by another emotion- dread.

"Now, I know what you're thinking, but hear me out." Scourge insisted carefully. "Think of this- you have more power to back you up, *and* a ready supply of food. Plus you don't have to live in those leaky tunnels anymore and be chased out by Twolegs everyday. What more could you want?"

"And you're supposed to be my leader? How do I know if I can trust you?" The ginger demanded, his yellow eyes lighting up with determination.

"I never go back on a promise." Scourge answered coldly, keeping his voice and gaze steady with the tom's until he relaxed.

"Fine." The ginger said wearily, his whiskers drooping. "We'll join you and your Clan."

Chapter 7

Within a week Scourge's small colony had more than tripled, the park cats having been great recruiters, especially the sick one. Learning all of their names on such short notice had proved to be difficult, though.

"Justus, can you go out with Feather, Beatle, and... B.. Bun..? For food?" Scourge asked, fumbling for the name of the tan stubby tailed she-cat that lay licking herself on the wooden beans overhead.

"Bunny?" The black cat asked, tilting their head to the side, trying to figure out what he meant.

"Yes, sorry. My mind was elsewhere." Scourge apologized, pressing a paw to his forehead. It wasn't a lie, either. Lately he hadn't been able to focus at all. The wind seemed to be calling him elsewhere whenever he went out.

Shaking his head, he pushed the thought away immediately. Nothing was calling him. That was impossible. It was simply intuition. His gut just knew something was happening somewhere. That was all.

"Don't worry about it." Justus comforted before stretching up on one of the beams, calling up to the brown she-cat. "Hey, Bunny! We're on food duty!"

"Give me a moment!" The brown cat called back down, carefully picking her way over to the beams and sinking her claws into the wood, clawing her way down.

Scourge watched, an itch of a memory nagging at his brain. Something about the she-cat seemed familiar. He had seen her over a thousand times in the last week and every time he had felt the same nag.

"Problem?" The she-cat asked him sassily, her short tail twitching wildly. The tip was covered in scabs and dried blood (apparently she had lost it in a recent fight with a dog). He could almost imagine if her tail were still there it would be trashing.

"No." Scourge answered, looking into her golden eyes before it clicked. The morning in the alley. He had been chased. She hadn't expected him to attack back. Then she bunny kicked him in the stomach, forcing all the air from his lungs. He could still feel the ache in his chest.

"Then stop staring. You're freaking me out." She huffed in annoyance, padding away.

"You better have respect for me. I'm the one housing your brother." He reminded her coldly, the memory now nestled in the back of his mind. How could he forget something so insulting?

Bunny paused, her ears twitching. She had heard him. "Maybe I'd have more respect if you weren't such a creep." She shot back.

"So you don't even care that your brother is getting care here?" Scourge asked, huffing. "That's cold."

"That's not what I said." She growled.

"That's what I heard."

"Listen here," Bunny growled, turning back around, her eyes flashing with the same fury he had seen the morning he met her. "I'll fight for you. I'll hunt for you. I'll even sleep in your stupid little Twoleg nest. But I don't have to be silent for you. I can speak my mind if I want. Hell, I *will* speak my mind. And you can't stop me."

"You done?" Scourge asked once she had stopped talking, raising an eyebrow. "Because, correct me if I'm wrong, but Ford did promise me that you all would be here and behave if I gave your brother food and shelter. Which I have done. Now its time for you to do your part." He flicked his tail. "Now, don't be such a pickled puto and do what I asked, please."

The anger that flared in her eyes made Scourge feel giddy, like a kit

learning to do something for themselves for the first time.

"Well, I have stuff to do today, so if that's all I'm going to get on that." Scourge said, excusing himself and picking his route out; a hole that had rotted in the wall.

Once he had gotten outside, he could feel the chill of the wind blowing hard on his whiskers, paired with the heat from the sun boring down on his back. The wind carried scents that were warm and meaty. His stomach growled. He hoped that Justus and Bunny would bring some of it back to share with the Clan.

Ignoring the scents, he took his own path. Not sure of where he was going, but sure that he was going somewhere.

It was an uneventful walk, for once. It seemed like nearly all Twolegs were inside because of the chill. Which was understandable, seeing as their skin on their faces were bare with no fur to help keep them warm except for some of the males, but Scourge didn't see any of them, either.

His paws ended up leading him to the edge of the forest, a new brand of smells and feelings meeting him there. Confused, he stared into the trees. There was nothing special here. So why did he want to venture further?

Huffing to himself, he decided to give in to his wits. He took a step further into the soft grass.

Pausing, Scourge scented the air, the smell of mouse bathing his tongue. He could spot the smell furry creature nestled underneath the crook of a tree root, nibbling on some berries from a nearby bush. *Now this is getting interesting*. He thought, licking his lips as he slipped into a crouch. Fresh mouse wouldn't be a too bad of breakfast if things didn't fall through with the she-cats hunting.

Placing his paws carefully with every step, he eased closer to the mouse, his whiskers twitching with excitement at the thought of sinking his teeth into its soft flesh and the taste of its blood bathing his tongue...

Patience. He reminded himself sharply, taking a slow breath as he slipped in closer, the grass brushing against his flank softly. It felt wonderful. It felt like home.

Home. He hadn't thought about that in a while.

Suddenly, the mouse darted from the tree root into a thorn bush.

Startled, Scourge chased after it, clumsily, squawking in anger as the sharp thorns pierced his nose. He spat furiously at the mouse who he could see cowering inside the bush.

Then the grass rustled from further inside the forest, making Scourge's ears prick. Shooting the mouse one last glare, he shot up the nearest tree. Whoever it was, he was most likely outnumbered.

Chapter 8

Peering through the leaves in front of his face, Scourge looked down at the expanse of grass where cats slipped out into the open, four in total. *Great.* He thought sarcastically. *Now how am I supposed to leave?*

His ears twitched as the cats' conversation reached his ears from below. Intrigued, he listened, cementing himself down in place with his claws, sinking them into the soft bark of the tree.

"You know, Flickerbreeze, that friend of yours seems very distracted lately, don't you think?" A dark gray tabby meowed, walking forward and marking the entrance to the forest.

"I have a lot of friends, you should be more specific, Ravenwing." The tortoiseshell and white she-cat meowed, following suite.

"You know. Snowfall." Ravenwing prompted.

Scourge's breath hitched at the mention of the white she-cat. He hadn't thought about her in forever. Was it wrong to wonder how she was doing?

"Apparently she saw a rogue the other day and said a few things to him then he disappeared." Flickerbreeze meowed, shrugging. "She always wants to be friends with everyone. She's probably sad because he's not back."

Scourge listened intensely, his ears pricking. *She told them about me? Or another rogue? Why is she sad? I thought I wasn't even supposed to be here?*

"I hope she knows that she's not supposed to be friends with cats outside of the Clans." The other one, a rather large ginger tabby with a crooked tail meowed. Looking closer, Scourge could see the tom owned rather large paws as well, doning extra toes on all four of his paws.

"I honestly don't think she cares, Lionclaw." Flickerbreeze giggled.

So I'm not supposed to be here. Nice.

"If you guys aren't careful, she'll hear you guys talking about her and come all the way from sunning rocks to whop you upside the head." The last one, a mottled brown tabby teased.

"Yeah, right, Frogstep." Ravenwing laughed.

Scourge watched the four cats chat, laughing easily and conversing. It baffled him. Who was the leader of the group? Was there no respect? No boundaries?

He shook his head, confused. Maybe they just didn't know how things like this were supposed to work.

He ignored the cats and leaped onto another tree, digging his claws into the soft bark, freezing as the leaves rustled loudly, the branch swaying under his weight.

"What was that?" Flickerbreeze hissed, her head snapping up, her piercing amber gaze trained right on him. He hardly dared to breathe, crouching as close as he could to the branch, willing for her not to see him.

"Maybe a squirrel?" Lionclaw suggested hopefully.

"We're a border patrol, not a hunting patrol." Ravenwing reminded him. "I swear, you're always hungry."

"Well, I'm always growing!" He shot back.

"Maybe sideways." She teased. Turning to Flickerbreeze, she nudged the tortoiseshell. "It was probably nothing. Let's just get this done so poor Lionclaw can eat."

Scourge screwed up his nose at the blatant disrespect. Why didn't the tom care? Did he *want* them to disrespect him?

Flickerbreeze nodded, slowly pulling her gaze from Scourge. "You're right. I'm probably just seeing things."

Scourge slowly let his breath go, relaxing. They hadn't seen him after all.

Making sure to take mind in his weight, he slowly stood up and climbed along the branches, hardly moving at all.

A small terrified squeak made him jump. Looking around with wide eyes, his gaze landing on a scruffy black scrap on fur with the largest golden eyes he'd ever seen stared back at him.

"Um.. Hello." Scourge meowed awkwardly, half wondering how the kitten ended up in the tree, half wondering what he should do with it.

"*Mew*."

"Can you even talk yet?"

"A l-little." The kit mewled, curled up in a round ball, his little dark claws clutching to the branch fearfully, dug deep into the bark.

"What even are you doing up here?" He questioned, scared that the kit might fall if he happened to breathe wrong.

"My... My mom put me.. Put me up here.. T-told me to fall and die... I don't want to d-die..." The kit mewled, his eyes wide with terror and movements stiff with fear.

It was like looking in a tiny mirror.

And he hated it.

Growling, Scourge realized he would have to be the good guy. *Dammit.*

"Well, they're not gonna find you again. Stand still, I'm going to pick you up, okay?"

"I don't think I could even if- if I w-wanted." The kit whispered.

"Honesty. I admire that." Scourge meowed, leaning over and grabbing the small kit by the scruff. Slowly the kit unhooked his

claws from the bark, relaxing slightly into his grip.

"Please don't l-let me go." The kit begged softly.

"Wouldn't dream of it." Scourge mumbled around the kit's scruff, slowly inching his way towards the trunk of the tree, trying to think of a way he could get the kit down without giving it whiplash. Or a headache.

"Hold on." He warned, starting to go down the trunk head first, slowly. His blood rushed to his head but he refused to slow down until he had reached the forest floor. He gently laid the kit down on the crunchy layer of leaves.

"I *knew* I saw something!" Flickerbreeze screeched.

Scourge whipped around to look at her, freezing. Without another word, he picked up the kit again and sprinted away, not looking back. There was no way in Hell he would let them catch him. Not after everything he'd been through.

"He's got something in his mouth!" Another yelled.

"HE STOLE OUR PREY?!" Lionclaw yowled, most likely more worried about the aspect of the loss of food than that of an intruder.

Scourge ignored their yells and kept running until he was out of the woods, setting down the kit again. This time, checking his surroundings before setting him down.

"Mind telling me your name, kid?" He panted, taking in ragged breaths, his chest heaving with effort.

"I... Its Mouse."

Chapter 9

"You're kidding." Scourge laughed.

The kit looked up at him, unblinking.

"Okay, maybe you're not." He muttered. "What am I even supposed to do with you? I'm not your mother."

"I know. She's gone now." Mouse answered, looking around to take in his surroundings. "I'm hungry. Can we eat?"

Scourge stared at the kit. *How is he not bothered that his mother abandoned him?* "Uh. Sure. I have a safe place we can go." He meowed. *Maybe I can convince one of the she-cats to take care of him.*

"Is it far?"

"Maybe a little for you." Scourge meowed, hesitating. "Do you want me to carry you?" The words felt weird. Since when did he help lost kits? *I've come this far. Might as well follow through.*

"Yes, please." Mouse mewled politely.

"Hopefully one of those idiots found something formidable to eat." He grumbled under his breath, picking up the small kit, careful that his sharp canines didn't knick him. They aided in a killing bite more than once, but in carrying a kit? Not so much.

"Are the 'idiots' friendly?" Mouse asked.

Scourge snorted in amusement. "Maybe don't say that to their faces, kid." He warned.

"Why not?"

"You want them to like you, right?"

"Yes."

"Then maybe don't refer to them using an insult. Plus, your name is... How do I say this? Pitiful."

"Well, what do you think my name should be?"

Scourge rolled his eyes. *How should I know?* "Something that doesn't compare you to prey, probably."

He kit was silent for a moment. "Can you even change your name?"

"Why not? I did." Scourge grumbled, looking around for any of his Clan members in the dark alleys. "Now be quiet."

"Yes, Scourge." The kit whispered.

Scourge sighed in relief. Being the good guy was tiring. *How do cats deal with these little shits every day?* He wondered. "Brace yourself." He warned.

"For what?"

Without another word, Scourge jumped onto a fence post, looking around for the Twoleg den that he and his clanmates called home.

"*Wheeee*! Can we do that again?!" Mouse squealed with joy as he landed, looking up at him excitedly.

Scourge sighed again. Having found the nest, he started walking along the fence, moving his paws slowly, making sure to feel out the steps before he took them. "We'll do it a few more times before we're home." He promised the kit.

"Awesome!" He whispered.

Scourge set down the kit on top of a box. "So you're *absolutely* sure you want that as your name?" He double checked. "Because that's what everyone is going to call you from now on."

"I'm sure."

"Shadow it is, then. Follow me." He ordered, turning and walking along the sunlight warm sidewalk, the kit joyfully bouncing after him.

"This is gonna be so fu-HEY!" The kit screamed.

Scourge turned to find Shadow hanging from the claws of his deputy.

"Who's this pipsqueak?" Clay meowed, examining him curiously, a smug grin on his face.

"Put him down and you'll find out." Scourge snapped.

"Alright, alright. No need to get heated." Clay growled, dropping the kit who let out a small "oomph!" as he landed. "What's he doing following you here?"

"I found him stuck in a tree. Says somebody left him there." Scourge shrugged. "He was there for a few days now and I figured we could feed him and train him up a bit."

"He ain't no bigger than a mouse. You really think we can train him?" Clay sneered at the kit who scurried away from his taunting gaze, hiding behind Scourge's paws.

Scourge bent his head to meet the tom's gaze with his own. "You forget yourself, Clay." He warned icily. "You should know better than anybody else what I'm capable of."

"Of course." He grumbled, avoiding his gaze. "Sorry."

"How is the food situation?" He asked, changing the subject.

"Lavender brought back some more food just a little while ago. Stole it right from under a twoleg's nose, so its fresh." Clay meowed, his gaze still trained on the small kit hidden behind Scourge's paws.

"Good. He needs to eat as soon as possible. Come along, Shadow." Scourge meowed to the kit, entering the Twoleg nest. "Watch your head." He told him over his shoulder.

"I do not like the big cat." Shadow mewed bluntly.

"The big cat's name is Clay and you'll get used to him eventually." Scourge told him, greeting a passing she-cat with a stiff nod.

"He's mean."

"I handled it, didn't I?" Scourge growled. How ungrateful did this kit have to be?

"Sorry."

Scourge sighed. "Food's over there. Knock yourself out." He flicked his tail over at a pile of scraps and bones. It definitely looked a lot better now than it did when Missy was in charge of hunting.

Shadow looked up at him, his eyes wide.

Scourge tried ignoring him but couldn't get rid of the feeling of his big wide eyes boring into him. "What do you need now?" He growled irritatedly.

"You're not going to feed me?"

"Why would I? I'm not your.." He trailed off, noticing the kitten fluff still sticking in his ears, his fur still soft and fluffy. He couldn't be more than two or three moons. "Oh for gods' sake." Scourge cursed under his breath. "Alright. Fine. Follow me."

Shadow brightened and happily followed him over to the pile.

Scourge tossed a bone aside. "Until your adult teeth grow in, you can't have those." He told him sternly. "You'll ruin your teeth. And stuff like this." He tore away the flimsy wrap on a container to show Shadow a large slab of meat. "You just tear away the stuff you can't eat."

"How do I know if I can't eat it?"

Scourge rolled his eyes. "If it tastes bad then don't eat it."

"So I can eat this?" The kit asked, pawing at the meat. "Eww! Its

squishy!"

"Of course its squishy. Now eat." Scourge hissed at the kit, his patience worn thin. "Once you do, I'll introduce you to Lavender so she can take care of you." *So I don't lose my mind doing it myself*. He silently added.

Shadow stared at him, his bottom lip trembling.

"What's wrong now?"

"You h-hissed at m-me.." The kit's voice wobbled.

"You-! I-!" Scourge started with a growl then stopped, feeling the judging stares of the cats around him. "Fine." He sighed. "I'm sorry. Now eat."

The kit sniffled at him. "You're not gonna put me back in the tree, are you?" He asked, worry in his wobbly voice.

Blinking down at the kit, Scourge realized just how the kit had grown up. Surrounded by unfair punishments and "tough love."

With a growl, Scourge shook his head. "No. You're safe here."

Chapter 10

Soft, playful growls sounded in Scourge's ears, too close to be a dream. Still, he kept his eyes shut. *Maybe they'll go away.* He thought.

Another playful growl. And then a pounce. All at once, a heavy weight landed square on Scourge's shoulders, laughing manically, jarring him out of his sleepy state. His eyes shot open and he growled, rolling over and squishing the attacker underneath his weight. Normally, it wouldn't work because of his size, but thankfully, this attacker wasn't much more older than a few moons.

"You're squishing me! You're squishing me!" Shadow squealed, squirming away breathlessly.

Scourge snorted in satisfaction, rolling back over. He looked at the kit with a crude smirk. "You know I could hear you." He teased. It hadn't been the first time he'd been rudely awakened by the kit. It had been a little over two weeks after he had found the tom kit and he was growing steadily.

"Aw, darn!" He growled. "I thought I was being real sneaky this time!"

Scourge sat up and smoothed the fur on his chest with his tongue. "Cheer up, kid." He told him. "Soon enough you'll be stalking all over Twolegplace, your enemies not even knowing where you are. But for now," his eyes flashed as he looked at the kit. "You'll have to pay the consequences of being caught."

"No!" Shadow screamed as Scourge leaped at him, rolling him over onto his back and tickling his fluffy round kit belly. The kit squealed with laughter, his hind legs kicking up at the older cat.

"Oh yes!" Scourge debated with a grin. "You'll never escape!"

"NOOOO!" The kit squealed with laughter.

Scourge quickly snapped him up in his jaws and swung him around a few times before setting him down beside him. Shadow looked up at him, his eyes bright. "Can we do it again?!" He begged. "Please?!"

Scourge laughed, remembering when he'd beg his own mother to do the same. "Not right now." He purred. It was still rusty from being unused for so long, but with the kit around, he was sure it would be back to normal soon. He pushed all memories of his mother from his mind. He had more important things to do.

"Come on." He meowed to the kit, heading down the stairs. "Have you eaten at all today?"

Shadow hopped down each stair, one at a time, at his heels. "No." He answered, his large clumsy paws already exceeding his size and aiding in tripping him up.

"Lavender didn't feed you?" Scourge questioned, feeling a stab of anger. *I told her to take care of you*.

"I wasn't hungry." Shadow answered.

"Nonsense. You're still growing. Go eat and I'll take you out. But only after." Scourge ordered.

Shadow sighed and went down another stair. "Fine."

Scourge stopped and watched him hop down the remaining stairs, satisfied when he saw him heading for the pile of food. It looked like it needed to be refilled soon. The Clan was growing fast with the amount of street cats filled with the hope of warmth and food. Pretty soon, the lone Twoleg nest wouldn't be enough to fit them all. Scourge knew what he and Shadow were doing today.

Scourge padded up to the food pile, taking a few chicken bones for himself. If he were lucky, they'd still have some meat left on them. Twolegs were always leaving some behind. He often wondered why.

He padded away to his own corner, a little box filled with musty newspaper. He liked it more than he cared to admit. The crinkle of the papers sounded nice and reminded him of the crispy leaves that fell into the forest floor. *The forest.*.

He longed to be in the forest. No longer to be with the big cats who fought each other and ate kittens for breakfast like the stories he'd heard as a kit. No. He wanted to be a part of something. Something bigger than BloodClan. *Maybe a family?* A little voice whispered in the back of his mind. He pushed it away. Why would he need a family? He had all he needed right here. BloodClan was back and that's all that mattered.

No. Families weren't for him. Socks and Ruby proved that.

He jumped into the box and settled down with his meal. Just before he finished, he could hear little scraping sounds just outside the box. He peered over the edge.

A pair of bright golden eyes stared back at him. "Oh, yay! You're finished. Can we go now?" Shadow asked.

Scourge sighed. The kit was excitable, wild, and relentless. Maybe a little thick in the skull, too, but that wasn't a trait Scourge wanted to pin on him just yet. "Yeah, just give me a minute." He mumbled, turning back to what was left of his meal. It wasn't much, but choking on his breakfast wasn't on his agenda for the day.

As the seconds passed, he could feel the kit's impatience rolling off of him. It was like he buzzed with energy.

Finished, Scourge hopped back out of the box. "Have you finished your breakfast?" He checked with the young cat, who nodded quickly. "Alright. Let's get a move on. Tell Clay you're coming with me today."

As soon as the kit was gone, he came right back. "Done! Now can we go?"

Scourge nodded. "You're going to help me find some food today. You up for the challenge?"

Shadow sniffed. "What challenge is there? Its just finding food. How hard could it be?"

Scourge chuckled at his innocence. "Just keep an eye out for any Twolegs. If you see any, you tell me. And if I tell you to run, run.

Got it?"

Shadow nodded. Even so, Scourge could tell that he didn't take him seriously. "I mean it." Scourge growled. "You don't want to end up like Pike." He gestured to the old cat. Broken teeth, a crooked tail, a battered side and a twisted front paw, sustained from an injury inflicted by a Twoleg and a broken bottle. He was the prime example of what Twolegs could do if you weren't careful.

Shadow nodded again, slower this time. "Got it."

"Good. Now let's go."

Chapter 11

"Here might be a good place." Scourge meowed, pulling himself in front of Shadow to get a better look. The place looked relatively safe and better yet, it didn't stink of dog. "Go on ahead. I'll watch." He told Shadow.

"Are you sure?" The young tom asked. Scourge looked down at him. The young cat looked shaken. No longer confident like he had before they came out.

"Don't tell me you lost your nerve already," Scourge teased him.

"I'm just... I'm just a.."

"A kit." Scourge finished his excuse for him, his voice hardening. "I know. Doesn't change the fact that we got hungry bellies at home. Move it. You'll be fine." He nudged the young tom forward sharply. "I'll be watching. Just keep your ears pricked and feet light."

Shadow nodded nervously and slipped out into the open, heading straight for the garbage can. Scourge rolled his eyes. The kit had completely glazed over the bags sitting at the edge of the nest.

Scourge watched in silent annoyance as Shadow hopped onto the can, staring at it, thinking hard. He rolled his eyes and made his way over to the kit. "Get down from there." He hissed. "Do you want to get caught?"

Shadow looked at him, confusion in his eyes. "I'm getting food." He meowed slowly.

"Get. Down." Scourge hissed. "And watch your paws."

Shadow slowly slithered down from on top of the can, his gaze fixed on the grass and ears flat, landing in the grass. Thankfully, he didn't tip it over and make any noise.

"Before you go out in the open, you always assess which route is

easiest." Scourge grumbled to the young tom. "You completely overlooked an easy meal." He flicked his tail to the flimsy bags that held various delectable scents.

"Oh." Shadow meowed awkwardly.

Scourge sighed. "Its important to not only have your eyes and ears open, but your nose and mouth as well. Didn't Clay teach you anything?"

Shadow was still staring at the ground. "Um... Just.. Fighting.. Stuff.." He mumbled.

Scourge rolled his eyes again. *Of course.* "Well, when we go back, you tell him I said to teach you about street smarts. And that's an order."

Shadow nodded.

Scourge tore at the bag and food spilled out before them. "Now grab what you can that's edible and let's go. We spent too much time here already."

Shadow leaned forward and snatched up a squeaky container that crunched in his teeth. Scourge flattened his ears, trying to ignore the annoying sound and rooted around in the scraps before finding an entire ham bone- still covered in the salty juicy meat. Eurika!

"Lets go!" Scourge hissed at the kit who was still being picky.

"I haven't found anything yet!" He objected.

"You can't be picky! Move it!" Scourge spat, growing more and more aware as each second ticked by. His eyes flicked around nervously. They were right by a sidewalk and he could already scent a Twoleg with a dog coming up the street.

It was another agonizing two seconds before the young tom found something suitable and dragged it after him.

"Don't look back! Just *run*!" Scourge spat at him, taking the lead and streaking out from the backyard, his paws pounding on the

pavement as he heard the dog snuffling and barking angrily only half a block away. He had no doubt that if they took any longer that they'd be either dead or down a meal. Either way, Shadow would have to learn.

Shadow. Was he following? Scourge felt a flash of fear at the thought of losing him. What kind of guardian was he to lose a kit at the first sign of a dog? He risked a glance behind him to see that the young tom had finally taken his advice and was running after him, his golden eyes crazed with fear, the thick scent rolling off him in waves. Yet, he still had the food he'd found tight in his jowls. No doubt that he'd caught scent of the dog, too. *Too bad he didn't smell it sooner, though*. Scourge thought scornfully.

Scourge slowed his pace as soon as his surroundings got familiar, convinced they had run enough. Both were panting and Shadow stopped a few steps ahead of him.

"Now... Do you see.. Why we use... Our heads?" Scourge panted out the question, laying the ham bone down at his own paws, gulping in more air.

Shadow just nodded breathlessly, his golden eyes still wide with fear, but the scent had dulled down. His nostrils flared as he sucked in air. He still didn't set down his findings.

"Let's.. Walk the rest of the way, okay?" Scourge asked, swallowing.

Shadow nodded again, taking another shaky step forward.

"I'll lead." Scourge meowed, picking up the ham bone and walking in front of the young tom. He wanted to make sure that they didn't run into anymore dogs. And that Shadow didn't exhaust himself before they made it back.

It was a while before they made it back to the creaky Twoleg den. Scourge had made sure to set a slow pace, but apparently it had been too slow, even for the exhausted tom kit behind him. It was nearly sun high when they had gotten back.

Scourge strolled inside breezily, carrying the ham bone proudly in

his teeth, making sure to exaggerate the fact that *he* had found it without actually saying the words. In comparison, Shadow's offering and himself in general seemed meek.

"You found that entire thing all by yourself?" One of his warriors questioned, their eyes wide in disbelief.

"Sure did. The reason Shadow here doesn't have much to offer today is because..." He started proudly then trailed off, watching the tom kit beside him slump. He could tell he already felt terrible about his offering. "It's because he was busy fighting off a huge tom that tried stealing it from me." Scourge finished humbly, flashing a wink at the young tom, touching his shoulder with his tail tip.

"You didn't do bad at all today, kid." He told him proudly.

Chapter 12

Please be here. Scourge prayed silently, pacing back and forth along the invisible boundary that split twolegplace and the forest. He constantly looked up in case he had missed something- a flicker of white fur, glowing green eyes peering through the dark undergrowth, anything. It just had to be *her*.

He had so much to tell her. So much had happened since the last time they'd met up. And yet...

And yet, how was he supposed to know that she was sincere?

I guess I don't. He realized, stopping his pacing. *Is anyone really sincere, anyways?* Just when he was thinking twice about his decisions, the rustling of tall, uncut grass made him pause.

"I knew I smelled you!" Snowfall exclaimed happily, a bounce in her step as she pranced up to him.

Scourge turned back around to look at her. "Oh, hello." He said smoothly. "I was just passing through."

"Sure you were." She teased, looking proud of herself. "That's why I've smelt you here nearly every day of the week."

Scourge rolled his eyes, trying to brush it off. *It's not like I missed you*. "Okay, maybe I've been here once or twice. But I *do* have a right to walk somewhere other than twoleg place."

"So. What all did I miss?" She purred, ignoring him. "Apparently a lot, since I heard Lionclaw complaining about a rogue stealing prey the other day."

Scourge sniffed. "Doesn't mean it was me! The amount of faith you have in me is saddening, really."

She laughed. A wonderful noise that made Scourge smile, wondering how often he would end up hearing it. "Don't worry. I

know all murderers have standards."

Scourge stared at her. *No we don't.*

"So about that prey you stole," she mewed, grinning. Like she had caught him in a lie.

Scourge growled. "I didn't steal anything."

"Then what did you take?"

"How do you even know it was me?"

"Well, he described the rogue pretty well. Including a few telltale scars. And one white paw." She meowed, looking at him in hurt and disappointment. "Why'd you lie to me?"

"I didn't lie." He growled. "And it wasn't prey."

"What was it, then?" She asked, staring at him, her eyes still sad. The look in her eyes alone made him fell hollow with guilt.

"It was a kit."

"A kit?" She echoed, an accusatory tone to her voice. "You stole a *kit*?"

"No!" Scourge snapped, hating the tone in her voice. "No. He was an orphan."

"So.. You saved him?"

"You could say that." Scourge growled.

"I'm so sorry for doubting you." She mumbled, her green gaze dropping to her paws like she was ashamed.

"Wouldn't be the first time." He grumbled. "Look, I have to go." He could tell that she wanted to know more, but he couldn't tell her. Not just yet, anyways.

"Well, be safe." Was all she said.

"As always." He replied, hopping up into the fence. "I'll see you soon enough."

"Tomorrow, then?" She asked.

"Perhaps." He meowed, looking at her over his shoulder. "But if you don't show, I might just have to hunt you down myself." He flashed her a devilish grin and disappeared over the fence.

Scourge chuckled to himself and trotted happily along on the sidewalk. Maybe he wouldn't have to go looking for her again now that she knew he was expecting her. And if he did? Well, he had his ways.

He hopped onto the fence beside him, looking over his domain. Twoleg place was all his. There wasn't a place where he couldn't walk, feed at, or sleep. Everything belonged to him. Even if there was a place where he wasn't allowed, all he had to do was point a paw and it would be his in no time at all. His tail twitched with nervous energy. So why wasn't it enough?

He wasn't going to go into the forest again. This wasn't going to be like last time. He wouldn't die. He was stronger than that now. Smarter. Yet his heart was still as cold as his eyes.

He wanted more. Needed it. There was something he was missing. A taste he'd never tasted. An object he'd never touched. He longed for it. Ached for it.

If only he knew what it was. Something was missing and he *had* to find out what. He didn't know how, or why, or where it was, but it sure wasn't here. Not in this Twoleg place. Not along the littered streets or the yards filled with gardens of sickly sweet flowers or even the grimy alleyways. It was somewhere else. Somewhere beyond here.

"There's nothing else here for you." The shadows whispered. The soft voice reminded him of a distant dream and filled him with unease. ***"So why do you stay?"***

"Why do you haunt me?" He countered, his fur standing on end. He

knew this voice. It reminded him of sticky blood on his throat and seeping energy. "What do you gain from it?"

"What do you gain from living the same life over?" The shadows whispered back, the chilly coldness seeping into his bones. ***"What's done is done. You could do more. More than just this. There's nothing for you anymore. No Tigerstar. No Firestar. Just you."***

The mention of the names put a bad taste in Scourge's mouth and hate raged in his soul. But the voice was right. He'd killed Tigerstar. There was no more left of him. And Firestar was long dead. Not at his paws, but dead. Gone for good. So what really made him stay?

"Why am I here?" Scourge demanded. He needed answers. Now.

"Why are any of us here, really? Nobody knows. We just make of it what we can." The shadows responded softly.

Scourge felt the cold retreat from his bones and he could feel the eeriness fading and knew the voice would leave him again. "You didn't answer me!" He snapped, feeling a flash of anger. *How dare you quiz me then leave?!*

But it was too late. It was gone again. All that was left was the scent of cold, hard stone.

Chapter 13

Scourge returned to the shabby little Twolegnest that harbored his clanmates, feeling shaken. What did the voice mean? Why would they just talk in riddles? Why couldn't he just get a straight answer out of it?

All of these questions swirled around his head, heavy like fog, blocking out any other thoughts. It was like a whirlpool, his thoughts dragging him down with them.

The more he thought about it, the more he thought about what the shadows *didn't* say. They didn't tell him where he was meant to go, only that he wasn't meant to be here. Did they expect him to just up and waltz out and into the wilderness? Maybe get caught by a fox or a stray dog on the way? Die or be fed to wild pups, torn to pieces as they feasted on his flesh?

Besides, who would he take with him if he wanted to leave? Clay would have been the obvious choice if only he wasn't deputy. He would have to leave him in order to care for the Clan.

Lavender was taking care of kits, Missy was still terrible at hunting, Red was busy with the elderly.. Who else was there to bring?

He needed sleep. Sleep would help clear his head. He trudged past Clay, ignoring him as he tried talking to him and a few other cats. He was too tired to talk. Too tired to think. Yet think was all he did.

Scourge made his way up the stairs, his paws growing heavier and heavier as he stepped into each stair, heavily walking over to his nest. Maybe he should move it closer to down the stairs, he thought to himself. So he didn't have to make such an exhausting journey to just go to sleep. He sighed and snuggled into his nest anyways. Today was too worrisome. Maybe tomorrow would be better.

He closed his eyes, his eyelids heavy.

Moments later, he felt a warm weight press against his side. The scent of the newcomer soft and familiar. He didn't even bother to open his eyelids to see who it was, or open his mouth to speak. The weight didn't move and neither did he. It was nice, in an familiar sort of away. It reminded him of distant memories. Warm memories. Soft ones.

He decided not to bother thinking anymore, at least for tonight. He'd deal with it tomorrow, he told himself as he drifted off.

Scourge opened his eyes slowly, feeling groggy. The weight on his side was now gone and his fur had grown cold, but the sweater still carried their warmth. He breathed in the scent. *Shadow*. Just like he had thought. The kit had followed him to bed and made himself right at home beside him.

If it had been anyone else, he would had been angry. Furious, even. Scourge knew that. But the kit had grown to be a part of him now. There was no coldness between them unlike with the others. There was no need to keep him at a distance. In fact, he didn't think there'd ever been a day that there had been distance between them after the day he'd saved him. The kit was comfortable with him. Familiar. And it was nice.

It was wonderful having someone to talk to. Who wasn't scared of him. Who didn't just think all bad about him or judge him by what he had done before. And now he had two cats who would do that for him. Much more than he had before.

Scourge pushed himself out of his bed, stretching each limb in turn, shaking the tiredness out of each one before making his way down the stairs. Just by looking through the space where wood was missing on the wall, he could see that it was nearly sun high and he had somewhere to be.

He hurriedly grabbed a bite to eat. Taking a quick glance around he realized that out of all the cats there, both Shadow and Clay were missing. *Must be out training.* Scourge thought to himself. *Good. That*

kit can finally put himself to good use.

It also meant there was less that *he* had to do and more time he could spend exploring all the corners of Twolegplace. Or elsewhere, if he liked.

He didn't have many places where he wanted to go on a daily basis, usually he liked to keep things fresh, but there was something about that white she-cat that drew him towards her. He couldn't stay away even if he tried. Part of him hated it, the fact he had no say in where his paws took him. They just took him there. To the forest.

Scourge grinned as he spotted the she-cat on the other side of the forest. She was waiting. *For me.* He realized.

"Hey. Looks like I didn't have to come find you after all." He teased her.

Snowfall looked up with that silly crooked grin of hers. He couldn't decide if he hated or adored it.

"Well, you gave me a choice and I made it. And I couldn't just leave you to wander around my territory for hours trying to find me." She teased back, rubbing her cheek against his as he walked up to her.

He froze in shock, his paws stuck to the ground. The sensation of her warm breath against his cheek made his heart pound.
He trying to ignore burning sensation underneath his pelt, he looked at her, his try at a friendly smile on his mouth.

She giggled. "You sure got some teeth on you," she teased.

His smile dropped immediately. Ashamed, he dropped his gaze. *Shouldn't have done that*. He cursed himself. *I should have known.*

"Don't worry," she surprised him by adding. "I like it."

"Oh, so you're into vampires?" He smirked, acting like the doubt had never even crossed his mind.

"Depends if they're into me." She grinned back at him. "So tell me. What'd I miss?"

Chapter 14

Scourge told her everything that had happened. The fact that he was regaining control of his life, how Shadow had slept with him last night, and much more, leaving telling her about the voice of the shadows speaking to him again for last.

With a few changes to the setting, the time, and who he was around, of course.

He didn't know why he didn't tell her about BloodClan. It wasn't like she expected him to be any different. But he still felt like it was unsafe to talk about. Like it somehow made him more dangerous to her. Maybe it was the fact that it was still a link to what he had done before.

Even though her soft green eyes made him feel safe, could she ever feel the same way?

"Seems like that kit really loves you." She murmured, breaking him from his thoughts.

"I wouldn't say love. He's clingy, yes, but all I do is feed him." Scourge growled, offended. *Love? Who said anything about love?*

"And protect him, and saved him, and play with him.." She drawled out, giving him a knowing smile.

He felt a flare of anger. "No." He snapped. "I'm not.." He trailed off. Not good enough? Not soft enough? The words didn't come to his mouth in time. "I'm not right for him." He finished with a growl. "The fact you'd even *think* that anyone would love *me* is sickening."

"You're not bad-" she started.

"I *AM* BAD!" He snarled, hating the softness in her tone, the way she reached out to touch him. She was so different than what he was used to and he hated it.

She flattened herself to the ground, as if his words had hurt her. How could it hurt her? Not more than his paws could.

"I'm a *monster*." He hissed, his explosive anger turning cold. "I could kill you in one swipe. I've *taught* myself how to do that. How could you think I'm not bad?"

"I don't believe you're bad." She told him quietly. "I don't think you're bad at all."

"Than you're stupid. An idiotic fluffball of softness." He spat, his fur spiked along his spine. "How could you even *say* something like that? How could you be so *stupid*?!" He raged.

"I think.." She trailed off, picking herself up. "I don't think that anyone is truly bad. I think cats *become* bad because they see no other choice."

Choice. What choice did he have? He didn't choose this. This choose him.

Ever since that rainy night he ran away from his home. From his mother. After Socks and Ruby told him unwanted kittens got drowned in the river. After all the torture they had put him through.

After seeing what Twolegs did to cats on the street, it no longer felt that far fetched that they'd drown kittens.

"No." He growled. "I didn't have a choice. There was no choice to see. It was life or death for me and I chose life."

"Let me rephrase that." She whispered gently, her eyes meeting his as she took a slow step forward. "You had no choice then. But you do now. You have nothing you need to protect yourself from anymore. There's nothing to fear."

Scourge forced out a laugh. "Fear?" He echoed, letting out another laugh, trying to shake the prickles that went down his spine as he realized that she was coming closer. "I don't fear anything. They fear me."

"I don't fear you."

"But you should."

She came closer. "But I don't. I can't. Because you're just like me."

"Just like you?" He snorted. "How?"

"You don't know why you're here or what you're here to do." She spoke softly.

He stepped back, wanting to keep distance between them. "Stay away from me. I'll kill you if I have to." He warned, cold fear slicing through his veins. It was new and he didn't like it. Not at all. It needed to stop. *She* needed to stop.. "I don't care who you are."

She ignored him. "You can't hurt me, Scourge. Nothing can. You can try, but it won't work."

"You think you're special?! Untouchable?! Just because you're pretty and soft and some prissy Clan cat?!" He snarled, infuriated. Who did she think she was? Why did he ever trust her?

"I'm serious." She told him. Somehow she had gotten close enough to be face to face with him. He could feel her breath on his muzzle and her whiskers brush his as she spoke.

He couldn't tell if his heart was pounding because he wanted to touch her, or kill her. His eyes darted everywhere for a way out. He was cornered and couldn't move. His breath quickened in fear, his eyes wide and crazed.

"Last warning." He wheezed, growing light headed. He didn't want to. He really didn't.

But he didn't have a choice now.

He squeezed his eyes shut tightly and unsheathed his claws, digging them into her neck and furiously clawing at her. He pulled out chunks upon chunks of fur but no wet blood spilled onto his paws. It didn't bathe his face. The scent didn't fill his nose. He slowly opened his eyes to find calm green ones staring back at him.

"Finished?"

"What..? How..?" His heart thudded in his chest, his ears still hot with panic. His breath wheezed in his throat as he sucked in air, his eyes unseeing ahead of him.

"I told you, you can't hurt me." She explained softly. "I was blessed when I was born by StarClan themselves."

Scourge stared at his white paw, wondering if maybe he just didn't go deep enough.

"Nothing can hurt me. No mark will ever design my pelt. There's a reason my fur's the color of the stars and moon." She explained further.

His heart slowed and he allowed himself to listen, yet he couldn't make sense of it. StarClan? She had told him before of her ancestors. They made prophecies and watched over then to keep them safe.

But what did that have to do with him?

"And you." She continued, watching him, worry slowly creeping into her eyes.

He looked up to meet her gaze, still not sure.

"You came back to life after being killed, right? So it must be fate. We met because of fate. StarClan *knew*."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Scourge whispered, feeling betrayed.

"You hadn't tried to kill me before."

Scourge closed his eyes. "I hate you." He whispered. "Oh, I hate you."

"You only hate how I make you question things." She meowed. "Not me."

She was right. He hated how she was right.

And he could tell she knew that he knew she was right.

"No, I hate you. I hate how you make me feel and how you bring up my memories and love and everything I tried to keep hidden and locked away. I hate you, Snowfall. I hate you so much." He spat.

"Well, Scourge, I don't hate you. Not at all."

Chapter 15

"Well, Scourge. I don't hate you. Not at all." Snowfall told him, keeping eye contact.

His heart stopped. Why didn't she hate him? He just tried to kill her! What wasn't there to hate?!

"I think you're one of the loveliest cats that has been put on his earth." She looked him over, her eyes sad. "But somebody hurt you. Somebody hurt you, and I wonder who."

"Its not important who." He growled. "What's important is the fact that I made myself better than them. Bigger. I made something of myself. I made a legacy. A name to be known. Learned. Feared." He stared back at her. "You've heard of what I've done. You've *felt* what I've done. And yet, you still don't feel any fear towards me." He looked her over curiously. "Why is that?"

"Is that what you want?" She asked, ignoring his question. "Do you want to be feared, or do you just not want to feel fear yourself?"

Scourge stared at her, his eyes hardened and his jaw clenched tight. *Don't crumble. Don't fall. Stand tall*. He told himself, holding himself still. As if any movement he made would make him crumble into pieces.

Snowfall gently touched his shoulder with her tail and that was all it took. He crumbled.

Into her fur, falling into the soft cloud that was her. He didn't cry. There were no tears. But he felt weak. And fragile. Like if anybody stepped on him he would fall into dust, like a dry leaf in autumn.

He closed his eyes tightly, feeling her settle down and wrap her tail around him, holding him close and enveloping him in her warmth.

No words were spoken for a while. They just sat there. Her gentle

touch healing his weak and tired body, giving him strength. He had craved this closeness for long, but never was brave enough to ask. Maybe he should have.

"I'm so sorry, Scourge." She whispered. "I really am."

He found he couldn't speak. His mouth wouldn't move to make the words come out. But he felt guilty. It wasn't her fault. She wasn't even born when he had become who he was now. She had nothing to do with it. Nothing to do with him.

"I wish I could have saved you the pain and the heartache. I wish I could have been there for you." She whispered, her gentle voice soothing him.

"It was not your fault." He whispered into her fur. "None of it was."

She laid her chin on his head gently. "I know. But I still wish it were different."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"No." He meowed softly. "I'm sorry for trying to kill you. I know I told you I don't do that anymore. And I didn't lie. I just... I didn't know what else to do."

"I know." She said again.

"So you're not angry?"

"Why would I be? It's not like you hurt me. You were hurting yourself." She licked his ears gently. "You couldn't help it."

He flattened his ears. There wasn't hate for her affections anymore. It was just uncomfortable now. *Who am I to be coddled? I'm Scourge.* He told himself sternly. He pulled away from her stiffly and she dropped her tail, looking at him questioningly.

"Thank you." He told her stiffly. "But I need to go now."

"Maybe think about what happened today?" She questioned hopefully.

"Maybe." He replied, stepping away, relieved that she let him this time. "Just maybe."

"I'll see you soon, Scourge." She murmured, gently nuzzling him. "Come back when you can."

"I'll try." He promised, making his way backwards towards the fence. An empty promise, he knew, but he could tell it made her feel better. Something in him didn't want to hurt her. And something in her made him feel like he never wanted to hurt anyone. He didn't know how to feel about that part.

"I'll be waiting. Just come find me." She mewed quietly, turning away from him and walking into the forest, the soft grass rustling around her. Half of him wanted to join her, in the softness of the forest, but the other half knew that he couldn't. Not now, not ever. It wasn't part of who he was, and he was sure it never would be.

As he turned and walked away, this time not making a beeline towards BloodClan, he realized he felt lighter. The weight of the world was no longer on his shoulders. Instead, he felt as if his heart might just flow out of his chest. It was a freeing feeling, not having a stone in his chest that would weigh heavy.

Walking along the Twoleg dens, he could smell many things. Dogs, cats, the scent of gardens that were a whole bunch of flowers and bushes in one space, each scent adding a different and exotic flavor to the air. He wondered if the forest was like a garden. Maybe Snowfall would like the gardens.

He had a feeling she would. She seemed like the type to like the scent of sweet flowers and to chew on various green leaves. She was curious, and he liked that about her.

He knew that even if he wanted to bring her to the biggest garden he could find, with every plant imaginable and all the flowers to smell, it'd never be enough for her. Just like Twolegplace wasn't enough for him. It was just fine for a while, maybe a short lifetime,

but that lifetime was over and now he had a new one. He needed something bigger, better.

The voice had been right, he realized. Twolegplace had never been enough for him. It never would be. He needed more than just the same dens over and over again to see. He needed greenery, trees, grass that wasn't encased in little fences.

He needed the wilderness. He needed to leave.

And he would. Soon. But first he had to deal with BloodClan.

Chapter 16

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Shadow mumbled uncertainly as he looked into the twoleg nest.

"A little blood never hurt anyone." Scourge meowed, rolling his eyes, then turning to look the young tom in the face, his eyes flashing with a challenge. "You aren't scared, are you?"

"Me?" Shadow questioned. "Scared? Psh! No!" He deflected, avoiding Scourge's gaze. He couldn't let him know that he was absolutely terrified. Not after all he did for him. He took him in as a kit and this is how he repaid him? By being terrified? *Get yourself together, Shadow!*

"Then go. We don't have all day." Clay spat.

Shadow glared at his mentor. The cat who had taught him what to do. How to kill. He could tell that that was all that went on in his mind. The bloodlust bathed his thoughts and actions. Shadow could almost see the souls of the dead in his eyes. Angry and haunted.

"Isn't there something else we can do? Drive them out, maybe?" Did they really have to kill at every turn?

"If you don't have the confidence, I'll gladly lend you some," Clay offered, his teeth bared and eyes flashing with excitement, his brutish claws digging into the ground as if to anchor himself.

"I thought you said he was ready." Scourge hissed at Clay, his long, thin tail flicking in silent fury.

"He is. He just needs a push." Clay promised, launching himself at Shadow, his claws digging into the young tom's fur, scarlet red blood pouring from the cuts they made.

Hissing and snarling, Shadow kicked and squirmed, panic flashing underneath his fur. He bared his teeth and screeched as the older

tom savagely tore fur from his dark flank. "GET OFF ME! NOW! GET O-" He broke off into a desperate scream.

"ENOUGH." Scourge spat, tearing Clay off of the young tom.

Bleeding profusely from his wounds, Shadow scrabbled to his paws, not waiting for them to argue about what to do next. Dark soil churned underneath his paws as he ran, slipping into the twoleg nest through a place missing a board, his hind legs scrabbling at the surrounding boards a few times before he gained enough traction to push himself through. Whatever happened, he would make Scourge proud.

Somebody from inside the shadows cleared their throat. "What's yer name, kid?" From the shafts of the house and the dark corners, dozens of identical yellow green eyes stared back at him from where he stood in the middle of the room. Old furniture lay strewn about, tables and chairs, and a few odd shaped balls.

Shadow stared back at the eyes until one form stepped into the light; a white gray and black patched tomcat with a muscular build. "Well?" He meowed.

Shadow swallowed. "Shade." He lied, dropping his gaze to the tom's muzzle where sharp teeth poked out from underneath his lips. He cringed, imagining those teeth crunching down on his spine. He pushed the fear from his mind and raised his gaze back up to meet his.

"What are ye doin' here, Shade?" The tom asked. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the green eyed shadows coming closer.

"My mother left me. Then some cats attacked me. I-I don't know what they looked like. It went too fast." Shadow rambled, closing his eyes. "Please let me stay here. Just for tonight. I'll be gone by sunrise. I promise." *This is so wrong.* A little voice in his mind whispered into his ears, tickling the tufts of hair. *Very wrong.*

The tom looked unamused by his story, his narrowed eyes unforgiving. "No."

"Oh, come on, Clover!" A young she-cat meowed. "It'll only be 'fer tonight!"

"I said no, Ann!" Clover snapped at the she-cat who stood up to him. They looked nearly identical. "That's final."

The young she-cat glared at Clover. "I say he stays. He got attacked out there. Plus you heard what kind 'a cats live out there now!" Ann protested.

She's talking about us. BloodClan. Shadow realized, his stomach dropping.

Clover's lip quivered between a snarl and a smile for a few seconds before he caved. "Alright, he can stay." He looked sharply over at Shadow. "*Only* for tonight."

Shadow dipped his head in understanding. "That's all I need." He murmured.

"Come on an' follow me. I'll show ya where ye can sleep." Ann meowed cheerfully, padding up to him happily.

Shadow nodded and silently followed her, looking around. His eyes adjusted to the dark and now he could see that the owners of the striking eyes he had seen were the tom's family. They all wore the same pelt and eyes. He shuddered slightly. *Is this some sort of cult?* He wondered.

"Here ya go!" She purred cheerfully.

Shadow looked down to see a pile of dirty rags at his paws. Sure, it wasn't what he was used to, but he wasn't picky. "Thank you." He meowed sincerely, flopping down onto the pile to clean his wounds.

"I'll leave ya to it. If ya need anythin' just holler." She told him before padding away, making her way over to a group of cats around her age.

"I will." Shadow murmured.

"Just know that I'm watching ya, kid." Clover warned from behind

him. Shadow could see him out of the corner of his eyes. "If ya hurt anyone 'ere, you will be erased. Gone. Done with. Ya hear?"

"You don't need to worry about me." Shadow told him. *Yet.*

From his quiet corner of rags, Shadow could see the steady rising and falling of the sleeping cats' flanks that were laying in the middle of the room, Ann laying closest to him. Waiting for a few more minutes to pass, he silently slid out of his bed, careful not to disturb her. *I'm sorry.* He thought to her, watching her whiskers twitch as she dreamt. Her round face reminding him of his own sister. She was gone now. Dead. Drowned. Pushing the thoughts from his mind, he passed her, his pawsteps light and silent, not making a sound. The sound of their breathing sounded almost deafening as he rushed in graceful strides towards the entrance, his target laying peacefully in front.

Clover.

Pushing all thoughts and emotion from his mind, he buried his white teeth into the tom's neck, squeezing his eyes shut. *Please stop moving. Please stop moving. Please stop moving*. He silently begged as the tom's paws churned at his sides, caressing him. He made the mistake of opening his eyes early.

In the patched tom's eyes he could see vulnerability. Pure fear. The look of a lost kit fighting to make his way in life. Only wanting to protect himself and his family.

Shadow's stomach sank as he slowly let go. He knew that feeling and in so, he knew him. He spat out the metallic blood that had filled his mouth. *What's done is done. I can't go back now*.

A soft grumble sounded from behind him. He froze.

Slowly, Shadow turned.

There sat Ann, stirring in her sleep. Panic seared through him and he leaped, no other thoughts in his mind. She had to be quiet. Even if it was permanent.

One by one, bodies fell to the floor, scarlet blood soaking into the dirt floor, the smell tainting the air.

Looking around wildly, he looked for his next victim. Not because he wanted to, but because he had to. The smell of the sticky liquid clogged his throat and strangled him. *I can't breathe!*

His chest heaved as he staggered out of the den. He'd done it. He'd done what they'd asked. He cleaned out the nest. He spat out some blood, sucking in the cool night air. The scent was still hot and foggy in his mind, making him sick. He retched.

"You'll get used to it." Scourge told him, touching his shoulder gently with his tail to steady him.

"Never." Shadow gasped. All he could see was red. Red was everywhere.

"Listen to me. You did good, Shadow. You proved yourself." Scourge told him. "I'm proud of you."

"No." Shadow spat. "*No*. Never again. *NEVER!*"

"What are you talking about? You can't just refuse-"

"*Never*! I'm done! I'm done with *BloodClan* and with *killing*! You can't make me!" Shadow snarled, snapping his jaws at Scourge, baring his teeth, walking past him, not letting his gaze leave the black tom for a second.

"We can talk about-" Scourge started to argue.

"*NO*." Shadow interrupted before running off. He didn't know where he was going, but that he had to get away. Away from all of this madness. There was no way he was ever going to taste blood again. Not if he could help it.

Chapter 17

Scourge stared after the young tom, shocked. Just like that. He was gone. Leaving.

"YOU CAN'T LEAVE BLOODCLAN!" Clay yowled after him, fury in his voice.

Scourge could see the young tom scale a fence and look back, his eyes alight with fear and anger. "I'm not leaving a Clan. I'm leaving a group of scrappy flea brains lead by a murderer!" He spat before quickly disappearing over the fence.

Clay turned to Scourge, questioning in his eyes. Scourge hesitated. He'd raised the kit like his own. Taught him. Played with him. Fed him. Now all of his effort was wasted.

His confusion quickly turned cold. Scourge nodded. "Make sure he doesn't come back." He told his deputy, turning his cold eyes to where the young tom had scampered off to. He was lucky he had gotten a head start.

He could see the dusty red tom's eyes lighting up in excitement before he raced after the young tom.

Feeling cold, Scourge turned away from the scene. He could smell the stench of blood and death hanging from the small Twoleg nest and soon, there would be more death. No longer was it useful to not kill. Why should he try to be good if it would just end in cats abandoning him? Did this happen to all good cats?

Shaking out his short fur, Scourge padded back home.

When he slid through the door he could see gazes filled with fear, some with excitement, others with curiosity.

"How'd it go?" One dared to ask.

"Shadow is no longer with us. He was killed shortly after

completing his task." Scourge announced coldly. *Let them take it as they will.*

"Oh no." Lavender whispered. Her eyes were filled with sorrow. "Fly high, baby boy." She murmured, her voice full of sadness.

"Yes. It's very saddening. That being said, its only logical that the one responsible for sending him on this quest should be held responsible." Scourge spoke coldly, his voice freezing the air and stealing the breath from all the cats around him. "Rudy."

A red tom froze in the crowd.

Scourge's eyes hardened. "You chose the task that was to be given to him."

"N-no, I.. I didn't." Rudy answered, already shaking.

"Yes, you did." *No, he didn't. But they don't need to know that*. Scourge flexed his claws. He needed this. An outlet. Too much had happened. It weighed heavily on his shoulders, like an itch that just couldn't be scratched.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Scourge, I never-"

"You did."

The crowd had quickly dissipated. Nothing stood between the two cats anymore.

"Rudy."

"Y-yes?"

"Die."

Throwing himself at the red tom, he quickly silenced his screams of fear and agony with a sharp bite to the throat, the weight lifting from his shoulders instantly. His muscles relaxed.

It felt wonderful. Freeing. Like a bird learning how to fly. All the weight on top of his shoulders disappeared. He could breathe again.

Scourge picked himself off of the tom, drenched in sticky red blood. He turned to look at the cats that surrounded him.

"And that is my example of what happens if you wrong me." Scourge said simply before picking his way up the stairs to his bed. He could hear one cat wail, another gag, and others whispering about what they should do next.

Rudy hadn't done anything, really.

He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Sure, he was annoyingly skittish and hardly any much of anything, but he could hunt when others couldn't. Always willing to go looking for food.

Would he miss him?

No.

Did he regret it?

Not exactly.

With a huff, Scourge slid into his nest, relaxing into the soft material, gently cleaning away the blood from his fur. He purred.

Laying his head on top of his paws, he sighed, drifting off to sleep.

When he awoke, everything was dark. The shadows were suffocating and so was the silence. Slowly the darkness creeped in closer, closing off more and more of the room as they progressed.

Scourge shot up in his bed. "What do you want from me?" He demanded. "Is this because I killed him? He deserved it. You know he did."

There was no room for weakness in the world. Rudy had been the exact definition of weakness.

"You don't truly believe that, do you, now, Scourge?" The shadows whispered as they still grew closer. They didn't stop.

"Of course I do." He growled.

"Shadow didn't deserve this." The shadows whispered back, ignoring him.

"Neither did I. Go bother somebody that cares." He snapped, trying to keep his fur flat as his heart fluttered with panic. Was he already in too deep? How did he make it stop?

"So ready to stop, but never to start, huh?" The voice whispered, the darkness creeping at his paws.

He shuffled away, pulling his tail in close. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes. You do." The darkness said, loud and deafening in his ears before crashing down on him like a heavy wave in the ocean.

Scourge's eyes shot open and he gasped, panic making his heart pound. What did it mean?

He whipped his head around, gaining his surroundings only to find that he was laying alone in his bed.

It was early in the morning, before sun rise. He could tell by the lightening darkness that peeked through the windows.

Crawling from his bed, he made his way over to the window, propping his paws up on the sill, looking outside.

Outside he could see Twoleg nests lined all up in a row, nice and neat. All a different color, but all basically the same. But that wasn't what interested him. What interested him was what lay beyond that line. Beyond the forest. There had to be more to life than what he was doing now, he knew. But what?

Scourge set his jaw determinedly. *I guess I'll just have to figure it out for myself, then.*

Chapter 18

Scourge slunk forward along the branch, holding his breath. His target was in sights. Now just wait...

Now! He launched himself from the branch, landing square in front of the white she-cat, scaring off a squirrel in the process.

"Scourge?! What are you doing here?!" Snowfall demanded furiously, looking around nervously. "We might get caught!"

"Shh! I know! I'm sorry! I just had to talk to you!" He hissed softly, trying to keep his voice down as to not disturb the white cat's clanmates that were in the bushes only fox lengths away. After getting the dream where he had been swallowed by shadows he had not been able to focus on anything and needed to tell someone.

"Can it wait for another time?!" She asked, her eyes wide and begging. "I'm busy!"

"No, look! Shadow died and I-" he stopped. He couldn't tell her that he killed. No. That would break her. Make her hate him. "I was visited by the shadows again." He finished, thinking quickly.

"What?! Ugh. Okay. Just. Give me a minute!" She hissed, looking over her shoulder nervously. "Ravenwing, I'm going a little further to look for prey. Can't find anything here." She said, a little bit louder.

"Yeah, whatever, just watch out for rogues." A she-cat's voice sounded from the bushes, sounding distracted.

"Now we have about three seconds to get out of here before she realizes what happened. *Move*." Snowfall growled, rushing forward.

Nodding, Scourge scurried after her into some bushes, growling softly as the thorns tugged at his fur.

"Do you have to bring me some place as prickly as this?" He

complained as the sharp thorns stabbed at him.

"Do you want to talk or not?" Snowfall snapped.

"Yes!"

"Then don't complain!"

Growling angrily, he shut his mouth. *You're lucky you're pretty.*

After what seemed like an eternity of prickles and pain, the she-cat finally brought him to a tiny empty space between the thorn bushes. They both sat down.

"Okay, *now* you can tell me what's up." She said, turning her green eyes to him.

"The shadows visited me last night. In a dream." He explained in a hushed tone. Getting caught by clan cats wasn't exactly ideal now that he knew what he wanted.

"And? You don't have to stop every time you give me new information. I'm not slow." She snorted sarcastically, her whiskers twitching in irritation.

"Okay, fine. They came in real close, everything was dark, and they kept saying weird stuff like.. I'm ready to stop but never to stop." He explained. Looking at her confused face he soon realized it didn't make sense if he didn't tell her what he did before the dream. "Um... Shadow died as well.. And... I attacked the cat responsible." He lied through his teeth.

How could he tell her that he killed an innocent cat?

How could he look her in the eyes and confidently tell her something like that?

It was simple. He couldn't.

And he never would.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Snowfall whispered, her eyes wide with sorrow.

"You must feel so terrible. I know you loved him."

Scourge stared into her face, her wide eyes, her wide beautiful eyes, realizing that the emotion she was giving him wasn't pity, but empathy.

She knew loss.

He almost felt bad as the she-cat rubbed her cheek against his, gently licking his ears comfortingly.

Almost.

He leaned into her touch, letting her warmth fuel his soul. Maybe he wouldn't feel so cold if he let her.

"I don't know." He confessed. "But I realized that I cannot stay in Twoleg place any longer. Not with all my memories there."

"Aw, I understand.." She murmured, still grooming his fur with her gentle tongue. "It must be hard."

Sighing, Scourge closed his eyes, letting her groom him. "That's why I'm going to leave in a week."

She paused her licking to look at him. "Why a week?"

He opened his eyes to look at her. "Well, I can't go alone, now, can I?"

Disbelief filled her bright green eyes and she shook her head. "You can't possibly mean.."

"I do. I want you to come with me." Scourge meowed.

"I can't. I have my Clan here..." She drawled.

"Come on, you never wondered what's past the skyline?" He urged.

He could see her tail flicking nervously as she looked around. "I might.." She admitted. "But I can't leave. This is my home."

"It's not for forever," he promised. "Just... Just think about it, okay?

The offer's there if you want it."

"Well, thank you for thinking of me, but I don't really have much time. I'm supposed to be hunting right now." She mewed.

"I understand." He dipped his head. "I'll take my leave, then."

"Goodbye, Scourge." She murmured.

"Bye." He meowed, picking his way out of the thorn bushes and walking back into Twolegplace.

Once he had gotten back into the familiar scene of concrete and fenced in grass, he let out a deep sigh. *Is it too much to hope she decides to come?* He wondered to himself. *And if she doesn't, what will I do then?*

Going alone, though an option, wasn't exactly an ideal situation. There was just too much to worry about. Like what if there were big animals that could kill him? He would need somebody there to help him take them down.

Or if it were too dangerous to sleep? Who would watch over him?

Nobody.

It would just be him. All alone. Braving everything by himself.

Half of him hoped that she just said all that stuff about her Clan because she was worried about going. Once she realized that it was the best choice for both of them he was sure that she would choose to join him after all.

She deserved some adventure in her life, away from all of the ThunderClan cats. She wasn't like them as far as he was concerned. She was good and kind. Not like Tigerclaw.

He cringed at the memory. He had just been a kit and already been exposed to pain at the paws of a ThunderClan cat. Never again.

They didn't deserve her and her kindness.

But then again, did he?

Chapter 19

"Clay, I need to speak to you." Scourge meowed.

"Sure, what's the problem?" The hefty tom asked, padding up to him like a happy puppy, proud to be of use.

Deciding not to draw it out longer than it had to be, Scourge kept it short and sweet. "I'm going to be leaving in a week."

By the look of the tom's face you would have assumed that he had killed his mother.

"What for?"

"Well, it's getting crowded here, yes?"

"Well, yeah, but we could always find another nest." Clay said.

"Abandoned? I don't think so. Not here, at least. That's why I'm going out. To look for s new place to live." Scourge explained to the dusty red tom.

"Will you be taking anyone with you?"

"No, I don't think so." He meowed. *If I take someone with me, I'll never get away from this place!*

"Isn't it dangerous to explore alone?" Clay pressed.

"I can handle myself. And you'll need as many working paws as possible to keep everyone fed." He pointed out.

"And you said a week from now? What are you expecting to do until then?"

"Make sure everybody knows what they're supposed to be doing." Scourge said simply.

"Starting with...?"

"You. You'll need to take over when I'm gone."

"How long are you planning on being gone?"

"As long as it takes."

Over the next week, he did as he promised, teaching Clay everything there was to leading the Clan, sending out patrols, seeing over training, and everything else he needed to know.

Now all there was to do was tell the Clan.

And find out Snowfall's answer.

He couldn't tell which made him more anxious.

Today was the day. *So just say it.*

Taking a breath, he calmed his nerves and began.

"Clanmates, I have something important to tell you." He spoke loudly, letting his voice fill the four walls of the Twoleg nest, commanding all that were within it to listen. All commotion soon came to a still.

"As you all know, we, BloodClan, are strong, growing rapidly. With our numbers growing as they do, we need space and food now more than ever. With that being said," he paused, his gaze sweeping over his Clan to ensure he had their attention. Countless glowing eyes blinked back at him. "I will be leaving to find a space beyond Twolegplace for us to live. Alone. I know that your loyalty to me and our Clan is admirable, but this is my duty as leader." Scourge placed his paw over his chest. "While I am gone, I will leave Clay in charge. You are to respect him as you would me. Respect and obey, as he is your leader now."

He hopped down from where he sat on top of the stairs to join the cats that sat all around the floor. He could feel their questioning stares burning into his pelt but nobody stopped him as he weaved

through the crowd. He could hear soft pawsteps behind him as the crowd of cats slowly became animated once more.

Scourge took a deep breath of the chilly breeze as he walked along the sidewalks for the last time, taking in the sights and smells. This used to be his home.

Not anymore.

The shadows were right. There was nothing left for him here anymore.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see a flicker of cat hiding behind a thorny hedge.

He narrowed his eyes. *Who followed me?*

Experimentally, he kept walking normally, his gaze flicking back periodically to check if the cat was still following. The pawsteps didn't stop.

He stopped once he caught a whiff of who it was.

"You do realize you're not as sneaky as you were lead to believe, don't you, Bunny?" He questioned out loud, his voice a cold hiss.

He could hear soft cursing then more pawsteps as the sandy she-cat pulled herself out of hiding.

He turned to look at her, glaring. "What do you think you're doing here?"

"Finding out where you're really going." She meowed honestly.

Scourge growled. "What do you mean?"

"You really thought we were going to believe that you would go alone to find some place for us to leave? Alone?" The she-cat asked sassily.

"Watch your tone," he warned coldly.

"You're not my leader anymore. You said so yourself." She pointed out with a delighted grin. "So where are you going?"

"That is none of your business." He snapped, turning away to leave.

"Is it to be with that white she-cat?"

Scourge stopped, his blood running cold. *How does she know about Snowfall?*

"How long have you been following me?" He questioned icily.

"Oh, don't worry. I haven't told anybody. And as long as you take me with you, it'll stay that way."

"Why do you want that?"

"I'm tired of being stuck in Twolegplace. I want adventure. And that just so happens to be what you want as well." Bunny was still grinning. She'd thought this out.

If I don't let her come, she'll tell BloodClan about Snowfall.. Who knows what they'll think. He fretted. *But if I do, I'll have to be with* her.

"Fine." He hissed. "But don't say *anything*. If you do, I'll kill you."

He could see that the she-cat was weighing out her options.

"Deal."

Growling, he made his way to the forest, a overjoyed Bunny following him.

There he found Snowfall waiting patiently, staring up at the cloudy sky.

Snowfall smiled at him, her sweet face setting his heart into motion.

"Who is this? Your mate?" The white she-cat asked, looking beyond him.

All at once the commotion he had felt in his chest died.

"No." Scourge growled, offended. Who would ever think that he would be with someone like *Bunny*?

"I'm just a friend." Bunny meowed sweetly, as if she hadn't just forced her way into his life moments before.

He scoffed. "Sure."

"Well?" Snowfall mewed.

"Huh?"

"Aren't you going to introduce us?"

"Ah... Sure. This is Bunny. She's.. An... Acquaintance. Bunny, this is Snowfall." Scourge introduced half heartedly.

"It's very nice to meet you," Snowfall said politely, dipping her head to the sandy colored she-cat.

"To you as well." Bunny smiled.

Scourge watched as the two she-cats conversed with contempt. Of *course* Snowfall would like the hot tempered she-cat better than him. They were *she-cats*. They always flocked together.

"Don't look so forlorn, Scourge," Snowfall teased him gently, giving him a smile. "I think it's wonderful you brought a friend with you."

"Sure." He grumbled, feeling dejected. *I just wish it were just us, though*. He thought to himself.

"Well, we should start getting going before it gets dark, hmm?" Snowfall asked.

Scourge's ears pricked. "You're coming, then?"

"You really thought I'd let you go alone?" She asked with a smirk.

Yes. "I guess not." He replied, walking after the she-cat.

Snowfall grinned, her eyes glittering as she nudged him playfully. "Come on, Mr. Tough Guy. Let's get a move on."

Chapter 20

"Do we have to go through Twoleg place?" Snowfall asked, her ears flat, burying her head into her fluffy neck fur with unease.

"What's wrong with Twolegplace?" Bunny mewed, tilting her head to the side.

"It's crawling with Twolegs." Snowfall mewed, shuddering. "They made off with one of our warriors not too long ago."

With a grim look, Scourge remembered the countless cats that had been taken from his own Clan. Plus, the idea of his clanmates finding him trotting around with a forest cat didn't satisfy him much.

"She's right." He meowed. "We'll go around, then."

Bunny stared at him, her eyes narrowed in skepticism. *What happened to you?* Her eyes seemed to say.

Ignoring her, he looked at Snowfall. "Just stick close to me, okay? Sometimes they like to travel outside of Twolegplace."

Snowfall nodded and fell into place beside him, walking so closely he could feel the wisps of her fluffy fur stroking his side periodically. Hardening his jaw, he stared straight ahead of them, opening his mouth to scent the air. He could smell dog, but it was stale. He touched the tip of his tail to Snowfall's. *Better safe than sorry,* he thought to himself, leading them further away from the fence.

"So, Scourge," Bunny spoke up from his other side, closest to the fence. "How did you meet Snowfall?"

A cold jolt of electricity went through his veins, making him pause for a split second. Regaining his bearings, he forced his fur to lay flat as he answered slowly, the words heavy like cement on his

tongue. "In the forest. Before I came to Twolegplace. I woke up from a... A coma."

"A coma." She echoed, side eyeing him.

"Yes." He said firmly.

"Okay." She shrugged.

"How did you two meet, then?" Snowfall asked, her eyes still darting around nervously.

"I fought him." Bunny answered immediately.

The shock itself brought the white she-cat right out of her state of fear.

"We had a scuffle." Scourge corrected, hoping to soften the image the words brought to mind.

"So how'd you become friends, than?" The bewildered she-cat asked.

"We're hardly friends." Scourge rolled his eyes.

"Well then, how'd you become acquaintances?" Snowfall corrected herself.

Scourge shot a warning glance at Bunny before speaking. "We just kept running into each other."

Bunny snorted. "If that's how you want to put it."

"Well, how would you put it?" Snowfall asked.

Scourge snuck another glare at Bunny. *Cut it out!*

"We shared a place to take shelter a few times, but that's about it." Bunny shrugged.

He slowly let out the breath he didn't know he was holding, relaxing.

Then he froze.

"What's that smell?" Snowfall mewed, her voice wavering.

"A dog." Scourge meowed bluntly, his fur bristling. It was too close to run away. Too close to do anything but fight. He stepped in front of Snowfall, shielding her from the brutish beast as it barreled through the hedge only mere tail lengths ahead of them, letting out loud, excited barks as it saw them, its long pink tongue lolling out the side of its mouth.

"*RUN*!" Snowfall yowled, streaking up the fence and diving into a tree on the other side.

Ignoring her, Scourge faced the dog, a big boxy built animal. Deafeningly loud and dancing with excitement.

He caterwauled a challenge at the beast, tensing his muscles.

"ARE YOU *CRAZY*?!" Snowfall screamed at him. "YOU'RE GONNA GET MAULED!"

The animal rushed at him, barking like mad, its jaws snapping and dripping saliva.

Without hesitating, Scourge leaped forward, ducking underneath the brute and slashing its stomach in one clean swipe. He turned around to access his work only to find the dog still standing. *How?!*

Scourge furiously looked down at his claws. They were red with blood, but not nearly as much as there should have been. Then he remembered the dog teeth were missing.

He hardly had a chance to react as the dog charged at him again, its claws scrabbling at the concrete, jaws gaping open.

In a feverish haze, Scourge lashed out, his claws scraping against the dog's glistening white teeth and sinking into its tongue.

The animal let out a pained howl, screaming in agony as its blood poured out of its mouth, running down its chin and onto its chest. Its tail tucked between its legs, it ran away, screaming.

Flattening his ears against his skull to shield his ear drums from

being assaulted, Scourge climbed up the fence, peering into the tree to see Snowfall's white body cowered low on a branch, her claws digging into its bark.

"The dog's gone." He said simply.

"Yeah, I can see that!" She sassed, unhooking her claws slowly, still shaking. "What were you thinking? You could have been killed! I was so-"

"Worried?" Scourge smirked at her. He'd gotten rid of the dog. She was safe. Scared, but safe.

She looked at him, her eyes in a glare before huffing and looking away. "You should have listened to me, mouse brain."

"I'm a what now?" He laughed, the feeling of relief washing over him. She wasn't too worse for wear after all.

She hopped onto the fence, balancing carefully before hopping into the ground.

"What? You're not even going to tell me?"

"No." She answered. "You already know what it means."

Oh. "So you're not even going to admit you overreacted?" He asked, tilting his head to the side to look at her. She was avoiding his gaze.

She turned her nose up to the air. "I didn't overreact. In fact, you underreacted."

He smirked, pressing himself against her shoulder. "The trick is to stand your ground, Dear," He whispered into her ear, his breath tickling her ear fluff.

Her ear twitched lightly underneath his breath.

"We have to find Bunny." She meowed, pulling herself away from him.

Scourge sighed, his ears flattening. "Of course we do."

"Whether you like it or not, she's a part of this journey."

"Of course she is." He sighed again.

"Hey, uh, guys? Is the dog gone?" Bunny called from farther down.

Letting out a groan, Scourge dragged himself over to the tree the she-cat was in. "Uh, no. Its not. Its still like, really rabid." He called up, holding back a snort of laughter.

"Oh, you're horrible!" Snowfall scolded. "Yes, its fine, Bunny! Come on down!"

Taking Snowfall's word, the sandy she-cat crawled down from the tree, her body still rigid with fear. *Of course she wouldn't remember any of what I taught her*. Scourge thought with a snort.

"Alright. We regrouped. Now we leave." Scourge meowed curtly, already leading the way.

"You're not even going to ask me how I am?" Bunny growled, still shaking.

"You seem fine to me," he said, eyeing her.

Snowfall nosed the other she-cat gently. "Don't mind him, he's just prickly. Let's get moving so that horrid dog doesn't come back with friends."

Scourge snorted. "He won't if he knows what's best for him."

"Good. Then we're safe to continue." The white she-cat mewed.

"Of course we are. I want to get to open moor before dark."

"Then let's go."

Chapter 21

They had ended up taking camp in a large oak tree with a large hollow in the middle. The leaves that covered the bottom of the hollow had proved to be suitable for making nests for the two she-cats.

Scourge, on the other hand, took his place nestled into the long branches of the tree, carefully over looking the moor that lay outstretched in front of him, the grass of the rolling hills bathed in the silver moonlight. He could just barely see the beginnings of another forest peeking out from the furthest hill.

It had proved to be a quiet night, all but for the rustling of the soft wind in the leaves around him and the breathing of his companions below him.

"Scourge?"

"Hmm?" He mumbled, his eyes still trained on the hills. He didn't have to look to know who it was. *Snowfall*.

"I just wanted to say thank you."

"Shouldn't you be asleep?" He asked instead of answering, glancing over his shoulder at her. The sight alone made him take a double take. Instead of the usual sunny underglow on her white fur, his gaze was met by the silvery sheen of moonlight that glistened on her whiskers, the light laced through each hair on her soft pelt. She almost looked like an angel.

"I'm serious." She insisted, ignoring him. "Thank you for dealing with the dog."

Scourge shrugged. "I just did what had to be done to keep you safe."

"Well, regardless, it was brave of you." She meowed, sitting down beside him on the branch.

"Mmhmm." He mumbled, the hills taking his attention once more. Even now, in the dead of night, they called to him. A yearning deep within his chest ached to find out what it was. "What do you think is beyond those hills?"

"I wouldn't know." She meowed. "I have no memory of before the Clans."

His ears pricked with interest.

"You look surprised." She smiled at him, the line of her lips tight, her eyes holding a soft ache.

"I just never thought that you might be.." Scourge trailed off, unsure of what to say.

"Just a regular cat?" She guessed.

"I suppose." He meowed slowly.

"Though ThunderClan isn't my family of birth, I owe them my world." She continued softly, her green eyes misting over.

Scourge looked at her carefully. "How did you meet them, then?" He asked hesitantly. From what he knew, forest cats weren't exactly the best in the welcoming department.

"Oh, some cats found me while on patrol. My father, actually. Along with Flickerbreeze and Ravenwing."

His mind flew back to the cats he had seen in the forest when he first found Shadow. *So that was who they were.*

"I was all disoriented and everything. Didn't even know my own name. I still don't. But they lead me to camp, claiming that I had suffered a fall from a tree while training, and me, not having any other options, followed them." She shrugged, staring into the beyond. Not quite at the hills, maybe somewhere beyond that, even.

"If you didn't have your memories, then how do you know all this?" Scourge asked, frowning. It didn't quite add up.

"Well," she chuckled lightly. Not a happy sound, but not quite sad, either. It was empty. Just existing to fill up space. "They ushered me into the medicine den where Fireleaf took care of me and my 'wounds' while they sat in the clearing deciding what to do with me. They just didn't realize how loudly they were talking, or expected me to be asleep or *something*, you know? But anyways. They were talking. And Adderheart, our deputy, was like,
'Well we can't keep her here! It's leaf-bare and we've got too many mouths to feed!' And my father basically told him that it wasn't his choice, but Jaystar's. He also argued that I wouldn't be able to live on my own, because all of my memories were gone. And he was right, in a way... I don't know what happened before the Clans. Who I was, who my family was, if I had kits, or anything else about me." She looked down at her white paws, an empty sadness to her eyes.

Scourge listened quietly, his brain trying to make sense of it all. How could somebody just *show up* in Clan territory? How did she lose her memories? What happened to her to make her lose her memories? Was it tragic?

He realized, at the end of it all, he was just as lost as she was.

The night breeze grew colder, harsher, louder as he processed all of the new information. Black edged his view as the leaves shook in the wind, deafening. The sound of the leaves nearly sounding like voices. Voices he couldn't quite place.

Not now! He begged silently, realizing that the darkness was closing in quick. He looked at Snowfall helplessly as she stared away from him. His eyes darted around nervously as he thought quickly. *I can't lose control!*

He sucked in a deep breath and laid his tail on her back.

The deafening chanting stilled almost immediately.

The darkness receded.

He could see again.

"Well," he swallowed hard, racking his mind for something useful to

say as he recovered, blinking hard. "All can't be lost, since you have somewhere you belong, now... Your.. Your father seems like a good, honest cat... And you seem to be happy with the choices you've made since then." He meowed. But even as he said the words, he couldn't help but fixate on one thing; her father.

What kind of cat was he?

Was he rough and tough?

Or soft and sweet?

He obviously was a good cat, from what she had told him. And she cared for him.

Scourge was nothing like him.

Who was he to drag her away from her Clan which she loved so much? All because he didn't want to be alone?

He felt guilty. How much did he ever really do for her?

And was it even enough?

Chapter 22

Opening his jaws wide in a yawn, Scourge stretched out his limbs, starting with his paws, curling his claws into the bark of the tree. He hadn't gotten any sleep while watching over the she-cats though the night and now the sun was peeking over the sky line, painting the sky a brilliant pink and orange. Taking a moment to appreciate the sunrise, he closed his eyes, letting the sun's warmth wash over him.

When that moment ended, he dropped from the heavy branches of the oak, landing neatly at its base. Propping his paws up on its thick trunk, he dug his claws in and stretched deeply, letting out a groan as his stiff muscles stretched out.

Little rustles sounded from within the hollow a little less than a tail length above his head. *Sounds like the girls are up,* he thought to himself, releasing the trunk from his grip and dropping down on all fours.

Two heads peeped out of the hole at him, one after the other like little ground hogs, a white one, then a dusty golden-gray.

"Any breakfast?" Snowfall asked hopefully.

Scourge chuckled at her scruffled look. Her fur was sticking up every which way and her eyes squinted, getting used to the sunlight.

"Sorry, Princess. I don't know how you do it in your Clans, but you're going to have to work for your breakfast." He informed her with a grin.

Immediately he was met by matching disappointed pouts and they pulled their heads back in.

He raised an eyebrow. *What are they doing in there?*

Moments later their heads peeked out once more, this time neatly groomed.

"Well hurry it up, Sweetheart, we're losing daylight." He meowed, turning away, looking for signs of prey.

"Since when did you use pet names?" Snowfall teased him, climbing out of the hollow, a few dead leaves clinging to her fur.

"Since when does it matter?" He retorted, his whiskers twitching as the long grass tickled his nostrils. Nothing like the short cropped grass he was used to in Twolegplace.

"No need to be snippy. Did you ever end up getting any sleep last night?" The white she-cat asked him, nudging his shoulder softly with her muzzle.

"Not important." He grumbled, stifling a sneeze that built up in his nose.

"Of course it is!" She gasped, her green eyes wide. Within moments she was shoving him back towards the tree. "Go lay down and get some rest. Me and Bunny will hunt today."

"Look, I'm fine!" He snapped as the she-cat hassled him, making him stumble over his own paws.

"Nonsense! You're not leaving this tree until you sleep!" She growled sternly.

Looking at her, he could tell there was no room for argument.

It might be nice to catch up on sleep.. A small part of him whispered. He caved.

"Fine, but I won't like it." He grumbled, walking the rest of the way back to the oak.

Giving a triumphant grin, she brightened. "We'll see you soon."

Hiding a grin, Scourge climbed into the hallow to find the crumpled leaves nearly still intact, the she-cats' scents all over them. He

sighed and flopped into the leaves, curling his tail around himself.

It didn't seem like long until the scent of freshly caught rabbit filled his nostrils. Slowly, his eyes fluttered open.

Instead of the sun filled sky meeting his gaze, it was Bunny, a huge rabbit in her jaws, her neck stretched out to its full length, a proud look on her face. The she-cat was practically glowing.

"Look what I've got!" She proclaimed excitedly, her voice muffled with rabbit fur.

Scourge stared at her, then at the rabbit, trading looks at them both. "Where'd you find that?"

Snowfall popped up beside the she-cat, holding the bottom half of the rabbit in her jaws. "The moor!" She exclaimed, almost bouncing with excitement.

Scourge pushed himself to his paws, rapidly blinking away sleep. His stomach growled loudly. He'd never gotten to taste rabbit before.

He waited for the she-cats to drag the massive rabbit away from the opening before he hopped down eagerly, his jaws salivating.

He watched painstakingly as the she-cats laid down their catch, admiring it for a moment before Snowfall snatched off one of its hind legs, tearing it away like a rabid dog.

Scourge stared at her in shock as she munched on the leg, blood staining her muzzle and whiskers.

He couldn't tell if he was scared or impressed.

Bunny, seemingly immune to the gore beside her, dug into the rabbit happily, purring with content.

Ears flat, Scourge eased up close to the corpse, breathing in its musty scent. Nervously, he took a bite.

Immediately he was floored by the amount of flavor that flooded

his mouth. Nothing like what he was used to. Light and meaty with a layer of earthiness. He let out a rusty purr of pleasure.

"That good, huh?" Snowfall asked, looking up for a moment from her leg.

He didn't answer. Not verbally, at least. Instead, he nodded, tucking his legs in underneath himself and burying his teeth into the flesh of the rabbit.

He could feel her watching him but hardly even cared. The experience was too good.

Once he had finished eating and was full, he laid back onto his haunches, licking his lips to clean the blood from his mouth.

"Is forest food always this good?" He asked, licking away all traces of the meal contentedly.

"Moor food. And most times." Snowfall answered, cleaning the red from her muzzle.

"And the times its not?" Bunny asked.

"When its rotten. Then its no longer food. Its carrion." She meowed.

"Not all carrion is bad," Scourge mumbled through his teeth, biting at an itch.

"You mean according to ShadowClan." The she-cat snorted with contempt in her voice. "I wouldn't know how they do it. I would throw up."

"Sometimes its all you have." Scourge mumbled under his breath. He could count multiple times where he had to eat something iffy from a garbage can. There were only a few times that he had gotten sick from it.

"Oh." She mumbled. "I'm sorry."

Instead of answering, he just shrugged.

It was a fact of life. You did what you had to to survive.

Those who didn't died.

Chapter 23

They had been walking for what seemed like forever across the endless moor before they encountered their first signs of the forest ahead; sparse greenery. Soon heather blended into bushes full of thorns and berries, the sweet aroma of fallen berries light in the air.

Scourge could only hope that they found another rabbit.

He could see Bunny loping through the tall grasses, her long legs aiding her strides as she raced around in circles, laughing as Snowfall chased her, both of their eyes bright with excitement.

Scourge watched the she-cats with a fond grin. Over the past he had grown used to the endless energy of Bunny paired with the lighthearted playfulness of Snowfall. They always seemed to find something entertaining as the days dragged on. Though it was annoying at times, he found it amusing at how fast the two had became friends. And how two grown cats could act so immature.

"Got you!" Snowfall yowled in triumph as she barreled over the ashy colored she-cat who met her with a flurry of paws. "*Ack*! Hey!"

"You don't got me no more!" Bunny yelled, taking the opportunity to race back to Scourge, hiding somewhere behind him as Snowfall came running after her.

"Don't you two have something better to do?" He asked, slightly annoyed as they ran circles around him.

"Maybe, but this is more fun!" Bunny laughed, dancing away from the white she-cat, wiggling with happiness.

"You should try it!" Snowfall purred, pushing him over with her large soft paws.

"Hey!" He snapped as he staggered, losing his balance underneath the weight of the larger she-cat. If he didn't trust that she was all

fluff before, he definitely didn't now.

The she-cat hardly paid him any mind as he glared at her, laughing.

"Why you-!" He snarled, leaping at her just as she ducked away.

"See?! That's the spirit!" Snowfall encouraged him, turning to meet him with a bright smile as she pranced away like a happy hound dog.

Growling, Scourge leaped at her again, claws outstretched. *You'll pay for pushing me!*

Snowfall, ever so oblivious, kept dancing away, just out of reach. "Come on! Don't give up now!"

It wasn't until the she-cat had him chasing her through the long grass that he realized what she was trying to do. *Is this play?* He wondered, slowing down slightly. She sure *seemed* to be enjoying herself. There was no malice in her laughter. Only pure joy. Her green eyes were bright and filled with pure happiness.

I'll let you have this once. He decided as he chased after her. Sheathing his claws, he leaped at her again, this time coming in contact with fur and muscle. Letting out a surprised squawk, Scourge tumbled to the ground awkwardly with the white she-cat.

Panting hard, he quickly tried to untangle himself from her but couldn't quite figure himself out, her long legs wrapped awkwardly around his own. The way he landed, he fell face first into her fluffy flank. *That was less than spectacular.*. He thought, warmth rising beneath his fur.

She was breathing heavily, her green eyes trained on him, wide with surprise. "I didn't think you'd give it your all," she laughed breathlessly, untangling herself from him easily, almost like she was used to such ungraceful positions.

"Was I?" He panted, not wanting to look at her and having her see his embarrassment.

"It felt like getting hit by an entire badger!" She laughed.

He could tell that she was teasing, but he couldn't tell what about. He'd never seen a badger, but he could distantly remember his mother telling him of them, back when he was Tiny. She had told him that they were large, burly black and white animals, heavily built with giant claws and yellow teeth, able to kill a cat in one swipe.

"I'll take that as a compliment." He huffed, still trying to catch his breath. *Do cats really like playing like this all the time?* He wondered. *What's the use?*

"Coming from such a small cat, you should." Bunny meowed, flopping down in the grass beside them, exhausted.

Scourge was immediately filled with rage. Baring his teeth in a snarl, he stood up. "I'm not small!"

"Oh? Then I guess all of us are just big then?" The ashy she-cat shot back sarcastically.

Before Scourge could react, Snowfall was in between them, gesturing wildly in front of them. "I think I see another rabbit!"

Immediately both cats were on their feet, the argument forgotten. Scourge could already taste the warm flesh on his tongue at the idea of another rabbit. Forest prey was good, but it would never compare to the slightly earthy taste of rabbit.

"I got it!" Bunny hissed excitedly, darting off into the long grass, leaving the two cats alone.

Scourge slowly got himself into position to follow before Snowfall's voice broke him out of his concentration.

"You're welcome."

Scourge turned to look at her, confused. "What?"

"You looked like you were about to go for her gullet." Snowfall said, shaking her head slightly. "I figured you needed a break. Besides," the she-cat continued, smoothing out her chest fur with her tongue. "I need a moment to breathe anyways. She'll be busy chasing that

'rabbit' for a good while."

Scourge slowly relaxed into a sitting position, still perplexed. Why did she care whether or not he was mad at Bunny?

Then it dawned on him. They were friends. Of course she wouldn't want him to hurt her.

It wasn't about him at all.

Feeling used, Scourge turned his attention to pulling the clumps of dirt and grass from between his claws with his teeth, ignoring the she-cat.

"But I've been meaning to ask you," Snowfall said, her sentence ending in a slightly higher pitch as she stretched out lazily. Though he was turned away from her, he could see her sprawled out in the grass, her soft belly facing the sky, letting the warm sunlight dance across her glowing white fur. Pointedly, he looked away, ignoring how much he desperately wanted to curl up next to her.

"What might that be?" He mumbled, pretending to be busy flexing his claws.

"Have you had any dreams since we left?"

"Dreams?" He echoed, knowing well enough what she meant. The shadows. The voice.

He thought for a minute in silence before shaking his head. "No."

"Do you know where we're going?" She asked, rolling closer to him, her bright green eyes full of interest.

Scourge shook his head again. "Just following a feeling."

"Which is?" She questioned, now only a tail length away.

That I want to be with you, his subconscious whispered before he quickly blocked it out.

He shrugged somewhat awkwardly. "Instinct, maybe."

"You don't think it's something bigger?" Snowfall asked, the genuine concern in her voice making him turn to look at her.

Had her eyes always looked this soft?

Warm and gentle as they held his, sparkling like dew drops on blades of early morning grass with none of the chill. For a moment, he felt safe here. As if there were only them two in the world and it didn't feel lonely. Not as lonely as it had been before, even with BloodClan, surrounded by all those cats. But he could clearly remember the last cat he had let in close.

A twinge of cold guilt rippled through his fur as he remembered the cold night when Shadow left. Not long ago at all, the wound of his absence still fresh.

Back then he had felt betrayed, failed by him, all because of what he had said. About him and his Clan.

But now?

He could see that the young tom was right.

Only four moons and he saw Scourge for what he was. It didn't matter what he wanted to be because in that moment he had made a choice. A choice that had ended the life of not one, but dozens innocent lives.

He had forced the kit to end all of them.

Scourge ripped his gaze away from Snowfall's, guilt heavy in his belly like a boulder and his body cold.

"I don't know."

Chapter 24

Scourge grumbled in annoyance as Bunny bumped into him, not for the first time that day.

If that hadn't been bad enough, she was also twinned around Snowfall, spending the last few hours asking the she-cat question after question, eager to learn more.

"What are your Clans like?"

"Is it like a family?"

"Why are there four?"

"Why such weird names?"

"Do the cats have weird names, too?"

Desperate to regain his sense of control, Scourge turned up his nose at the dusty colored she-cat. "I don't know *why* you entertain such foolishness," he sniffed in distain.

"It's only natural to be curious." Snowfall chided, giving him a playful smile.

"You could do so without making a fool of yourself." Scourge hissed pointedly, earning a glare from Bunny.

"Sounds like you need a nap." Bunny growled back.

Scourge just rolled his eyes.

He *had* been staying up late, but that was *only* because he was looking out for the she-cats. It wasn't like they were competent enough to look out for themselves, anyways.

"I think we *all* need a nap." Snowfall mumbled through a soft yawn. "We've been walking for *hours*."

"And who's going to watch over you two while you sleep?" Scourge growled irritably.

"It's broad daylight. If anyone attacks us, they'd be foolish." Bunny replied snarkily.

"Actually, Scourge is right." Snowfall said, soothingly laying her tail across Bunny's back. "Badgers, foxes, sometimes even stray dogs can catch you unawares out here. Thankfully, though. We have natural protection."

Bunny deflated. "Like what?"

Snowfall nodded around them. "Trees."

"You expect me to sleep in a *tree*?" Bunny growled in disbelief.

"Unless you have any other ideas, Princess." Scourge chuckled, already scaling the closest tree, eager for some rest. It wouldn't be the first time he had to sleep somewhere awkward. Once he even had to sleep on top of a cold, metal grid. The rabbits below had a fit the entire night, but it was underneath a wooden overhang and blocked out the rain.

He shivered. He could still feel the chill in his bones and the tickle in his nose from the cold he'd suffered the few days after.

He could hear Snowfall murmuring to Bunny below, her voice soothing and calm, as if talking to a kit.

She'd be a good mother, Scourge caught himself thinking. Her calm voice reminded him much of his own, cool, collected and kind.

Where had he gone wrong?

Had he been wrong to leave his home?

Scourge grumbled, shaking his head to clear away the unwanted thoughts. There was no reason to dwell on the past, now. Especially since his mother was probably long gone by now, unless she had come to life like he had, which, seeing as he was the only one he knew of whom it had happened to, and Snowfall's immortality

status was up in the air, it seemed unlikely.

Scourge dug his claws into the soft bark of the tree, selecting a broad, sturdy branch to then wrap a paw around, securing his hold, and leave one of his hind legs hanging, using the other for a push every now and again to stop himself from slipping. The bark was uncomfortable against his belly, the tiny knobs in the tree poking at his ribs and underbelly, but it was safe. As safe as he'd been in a while, at any rate.

He could smell Snowfall's sweet scent as she swiftly acended the tree, hardly even disturbing the leaves.

Meanwhile, Bunny came tromping up after her, the branches shaking as she dug her claws in, hauling herself up the tree with little jumps.

"Could you *be* any more of a nuisance?!" Scourge snarled, flashing his teeth at her.

Part of him wanted to swipe at her, just to see if his claws would connect and make her fall, but he resisted. If he did that, he'd lose his hold on his own branch and fall instead.

"I mean, I could *try*," Bunny retorted wryly. "But I don't think you'd like that very much."

Scourge let out a snort of contempt. Or amusement. He couldn't quite tell.

"You don't have to lean back and try to propel yourself every time you want to take another step. The bark is strong. It will keep you there as long as you use your claws for hold." Scourge sniffed, repositioning his hold now that Bunny had safely thrown herself over a branch hanging just below him, Snowfall at a vantage point above him.

"How would *you* know?" Bunny grumbled, still scrabbling to keep her grip, her lanky limbs awkwardly splayed out at all angles.

"I have claws and I know how to use them." Scourge growled in response. "Take it or leave it. I don't care. I'd find it rather amusing

if you slipped."

Bunny huffed. "I hope *you* slip." She muttered under her breath.

"Mm, you'd like that, wouldn't you?" He hummed sarcastically, closing his eyes.

Ignoring Bunny's surprised squawk from being caught, he wrapped his thin tail around himself, the cold chill still clinging his gray nose from days sleeping without proper shelter.

Not that he was complaining.

Twoleg Place was by far more dangerous in other ways and shelter definitely wasn't always guaranteed there either.

Besides.

The time spent with Snowfall hadn't been all bad, either.

With every passing day he found himself surprised with the white she-cat's resilience. No matter what had been thrown at her, whether it be rain, too much sun, or even just plain old exhaustion.

Whoever this "Starclan" of hers was right in their choice to choose her.